

Environmental spy



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COMPLETE NOVEL

LEGEND *in the* **DUST**



by FRANK O'ROURKE



Without law, the town was ripe for open warfare!

Illustration by Leone

AT the toe of the hills where the evergreens rose in a mass of geometrically precise triangles toward the distant Cristos, the trail was a dusty path winding southward into nowhere. Men had rolled that dust and cattle ranged the swells of those high plains, but only the trail gave lasting evidence of their passage.

The rider came from time's smoky nothingness at the gray-smudged atop the hills, only hat and horse's ears sharp-etched against the fading amber sky. The rider saw the hollow below the trees, the horse smelled water and sawed gently on the reins.

"All right," Glendon said. "Go on down."

He reined off the trail beside the tank and while the horse drank he knelt and splashed his face and rumbled water down his neck. He led the horse into the trees, drove the picket stake deep into the rocky shale, uncinched and slipped the bridle over the rope halckamer. The brown horse shivered with pleasure and went to browsing on the grass that tufted green beneath the trees. While darkness fell, Glendon gathered twigs and sticks, lit his fire, and broke open the grub sack. He boiled coffee, cooked bannocks and he sliced a thick chunk of bread from the staling loaf. He rolled a smoke at meal's end and stood in the full darkness.

He was a thin and slightly stoop-shouldered man whose arms ended in bony wrists and long-fingered hands that forever clunged to the trail. He fitted that long, lank, loping spare down the sweat-caked live tubes, rider's legs of flat muscle lying close around big thigh bones with the knotty calves bulging above his worn boots. His skin was bleached, but would never entirely lose brownness, large-pored leathery skin stretched taut over jaw, around the wide mouth and long nose, tugging shadowed wrinkle sacks beneath his deep-ridged gray eyes.

"Fort Ellis," he said aloud. "One more day, ho."

He slept fitfully and rode the trail in a pearl gray morning that came slowly alive as deep scuffed the clouds away and laid bare the deep blue sky and brassy summer sun. He saw cattle bearing the Cross C brand and, 20 miles to the south, skirted the lake formed by a huge artesian spring that welled upward from the earth's bowels. Below the lake in the bend of the overflow creek he saw the big house, the sheds and shops and corrals. John Colter's Cross C outfit was the only one known far and wide for an open house policy, for the coffee pot that bubbled on the cookhouse stove. Glendon had not spoken to another man in three days; he entered the yard with his tongue working rustily behind dry lips, tied to the door by a long, smelled strong coffee and heard voices within the cookhouse. The Cross C slept beneath the cottonwoods in the lazy midday June heat; no one struck up a band to bid him welcome. Everyone was working, only the cripples and the cook would be on tap.

Glendon took the bootown stone step through the timbered cookhouse door, raked back his hat and peered into the gloom that was thickened for any man coming from outside. The cook turned, his shaggy head and spoke in greeting, "Como sta, senor," and brought a clean cup and the gallon coffee pot to the long table; and the only other man in the room glanced upward over his white china cup that smoked thin coffee heat into the shadows. That young man was hunched at ease, big legs thrust far beneath the table. He waved one hand and smiled at Glendon.

"Set a spell—too hot for ridin'!"

Glendon sat across the table, stirred in sugar, drank deeply and offered his sigh of thanks. The cook fussed over the stove and Glendon, overly sensitive to the presence of strangers, felt uneasiness in the room. But the young man only grinned sleepily and sipped his coffee.

"Buck," the cook said. "Gettin' late, no?"

"Yes," Buck said, and smiled at Glendon. "Ridin' through."

"Fort Ellis," Glendon said.

"Not far," Buck said. "An' nothing to see when you get there."

Buck was a squat young man on first glance. Broad and deep-chested, his rib cage was sprung so wide his upper body seemed to descend without curvature into thick legs and large feet. Buck had a cowl-like over the room, moon face, his beard was fluffy, his mild blue eyes and straw-colored hair gave him a mused, innocent appearance.

"Buck," the cook said plaintively. "You go now?"

"Pretty soon," Buck said. "Come down from the north?"

"Yes."

The cook walked soundlessly to the door, glanced up the tree-shaded lane toward the big house, and swung around with a flutter of fat hands. "Buck, the patron is coming!"

"Colter?" Glendon asked.

"Nobody else," Buck smiled. "Ever met him?"

"No."

"Take a good look then," Buck said. "Likely he's wearing a two-bit straw hat, 65-cent hickory shirt, pair of dollar overalls, no socks, brogans that cost all of one buck-fifty. Grand total of \$3.40, give or take a nickel, and him worth a million today. Yes sir, take a good look."

"Aish, Buck!" the cook whispered fearfully.

Buck leaned against the wall just inside the door and Glendon saw past him into the bright sunlight and more distant shade of the cottonwood lane; and that was his first view of John Colter coming from the house, stepping one overall leg over a peeled willow stick, wearing no socks, placing his brogans on the earth with the intent stupid purpose of a plow horse plodding off work toward hay and water.

Starter than Buck, John Colter was equally solid and strong. Glendon had heard too much about the man to accept the doubtful value of so many stories, but even so his first look made those stories pale. Colter had the face of a cherub and the white hair of Kris Kringle, but the hair faded to dirty yellow as he neared the door, and the rosy face was harsh-wrinkled beneath a wiry three-day beard that failed to hide the sly roughness. Colter, so the saying went, had never been beaten in a duel, was a game of wits, Glendon saw the legend grow and become lifelike in the door's sunlight frame, the face squinting into the gloom as the voice rasped huskily at the young man.

"Buck. Ain't you gone yet?"

"Too hot," Buck said affably.

"Hot, any foot," John Colter said. "What we got, come?"

He walked past Buck to the table, and Glendon noticed the absence of belt and gun around the thick waist. Masterston had told him how Colter never wore a gun while boosing 50 men who did, thus saving the advantage of the unwritten law that you did not shoot an unarmed man. Colter carried the peeled willow stick and nothing more; and Buck swung around to watch him with a helpless, admiring look. Colter had increased the tension in the cookhouse; but he simply ignored Buck as he gave Glendon a long, rude look.

"Passing through?"

"No."

"Then make yourself to home," Colter said.

"What's your name?"

"Pat Glendon."

"Glendon?" Colter tried the sound on his tongue. "Heard that somewhere. You going to Fort Ellis—Jose, where's your manners, fill the cup!"

Glendon said quietly, "I'm going that way."

"Want a job here?"

"No," he said.

The cook brought a cup for Colter, filled the others, and retreated quickly to the pantry annex. Buck stroled over and sat beside John Colter; and Glendon felt the gap between them. He spoke his thanks to the cook, to Colter, and stepped outside. Behind him, during the day, the adobe walls, their no voices rose and fell in argument. Glendon had no business intruding on that private affair. He mounted the brown horse and faced southward where the trail faded hazily into the heat waves. The horse sudored from the shoulder, walked to the black horse, and mounted. John Colter appeared in the doorway and watched Buck who sat with one hand on the Winchester stock canted upward beneath his right leg. Buck's face was no longer so innocent; his eyes were inclined toward Colter like a boy surprised at mist.

"You mind company?" Buck asked.

"Be happy for it," Glendon said.

"Buck, John Colter said gruffly. "Mind now. I don't give you no second chance."

"Thanks for the first," Buck said cheerfully. "Adios."

Glendon nodded good-by to John Colter and followed Buck from the ranch yard into the trail that arrowed toward Fort Ellis. They travelled a mile in silence before Buck laughed and beat his hat against his thigh, fanning a puff of dust behind. "Feisty old cuss, eh?"

"Bendson asked."

"Oh, I ain't mad at him," Buck said. "But he's sure mad at me. I quit last night."

"Leave him short-handed?"

"Him?" Buck said. "He's got 50 men on the spread. I just got tired working for wages. Easier ways to make a living."

"Does Colter call you all?"

"Average," Buck said, "but he works you double hard. There's easier ways."

"In this country?" Glendon said.

"Why sure," Buck smiled. "Selling cows to the army for one. You heard of McMan's?"

"He's contractor at Ellis," Buck said. "Supplies the army. Buys every cow you can bring him. Work a week, you make more'n Colter pays in a month."

There was a thoroughly likeable quality about Buck who spoke so openly on touchy subjects to a total stranger. Buck had no sense of the army was legitimate business, providing the seller was financially able to purchase cattle and then make his resale through regular channels. But a young man whose sole assets were the clothes on his back, his gun, his horse and his head did not possess the cash or the credit. To speak freely of such matters was either stupidity or the nature of a man who went his own free way and cared absolutely nothing for other people. Glendon risked a question that, other times and places, could bring fast trouble.

"Whose cows, Buck?"

"Whose cows?" Buck said. "Why, John Colter's cows. Nobody else owns any around here."

"You telling me this for fact?" Glendon asked.

"Crossed his head and hoped he was right."

Glendon had to laugh, and Buck laughed with him. Long ago he'd been this way, filled with an overpowering eagerness for life, the wish for things just beyond his pocketbook; but, remembering, it was so much the material gain as the need for freedom of the mind. It had brought him close to trouble and death before he whipped that wildness. He could not give advice to Buck, for the young man listened, their ears were tuned to the distant music, but he told this boy, and he could try. He spoke cautiously.

"You know what that monkey business is called?" Glendon asked.

"Oh, sure," Buck said.

"No offence?"

"Not a bit," Buck smiled. "You mean well, but things are different around here. For instance, you see any fences?"

"No."

"Or law?"

"No, unless it's at Fort Ellis."

"You look real good there," Buck said. "I been lookin' six months. You find any law, let me know."

"Many of the boys pulling this cow trick?"

"Not more'n 30," Buck grinned.

"What does Colter say?" he said. "What's he doing about it?"

"I'll sort of draw you a picture," Buck said patiently. "Fort Ellis ain't much of a post any more, just a station to buy beef for the Mesqueros and the other forts to the south. The fort's six miles down from town, both named the same, except the town is all McMan's."

"All McMan's?"

"Stock and barrel except for Charley Leslie's store," Buck said happily, "an' Charley don't count for much. He's retired army, was a major. He got out a while back and started the town. Having army friends, he sewed up the beef contracts. Him and that colonel at the fort soldiered together, and the colonel don't buy beef from nobody but McMan's. That keeps John mad all week and twice as mean on Sundays. But McMan can't buy beef from John 'cause John won't sell him a bull bellow, so McMan has to buy all over and trail his herds in."

An' John's got so many cows he can't count 'em, let alone brand 'em. They just run wild to the west across the river. That sort of clear things up for you, Pat?"

"And no law?" Glendon said wonderingly.

"Buck," Buck laughed. "Oh, there's a marshal or two hanging around but they don't count."

Now I told you enough to hang me, what you figure on doing in Ellis?"

"Beats me. 'I can't tell you because I don't know myself.'"

"Just riding loose," Buck said understandingly. "Sure, I savvy how you feel. Passing along, looking around."

"That's it," he said.

"What can you do, Pat?" Buck asked.

"Little of this," he said. "Little of that." "Foolish question got me a foolish answer," Buck grinned. "But you punched cows, that I know, not lately but sometime."

"Not lately," he admitted, "for ever again."

"Well," Buck said, "You just come along. I'll show you the town. Take a good look—smell too—and make up your mind. When you get tired eating McMan's grub, drinking his whiskey, using his beds, you can always head for Ed Ross. Now if you were a lawyer, McMan'd give you his own bed. He can't seem to get enough of lawyers."

"But no law?" Glendon said softly.

"It ain't no trying," Buck said. "I guess he can't find a good lawyer. Was it you were a star someplace, ain't showed you could get along with him, then McMan'd give you his right arm?"

"No chance there," he lied.

"No?" Buck said. "Well, too bad."

They rode the trail that followed the dropping roll of land toward the southwest where the line of trees marked the river as it came from the north and swung in a huge bend toward the panhandle and the hill country and the distant gulf. He wondered how much he had fooled Buck. What was it that put the man on a man? The faded cloth behind the star, the way a man rode and walked and talked, the way he carried a gun and watched the world around him? Glendon had ridden 500 miles to leave the star behind, and the first man he met in an hour with a hat and a gun that seemed to sense, or smell, or feel that past. Then again perhaps he was lucky, for Buck had spoken respectfully in mentioning the law. That meant that in the moment, if all the time, he would only shrivel, turn to dust in Kansas, then he would be truly lucky. All he wanted was freedom, a fresh beginning, and it came to him then, riding off the trail, that a wagon road formed a path for a young man's dream of freedom when, all the while, his own dreams were far thinner by comparison. Thirty-six years old, hoping wider hopes than even a man's dared dream.

"Well," Buck said. "There she is."

They came into a single street that fronted the business block and ended at the river bank. Houses were scattered in no order behind the stores, houses built mostly of adobe, bleached by the merciless sun, boasting scraggy shrubs and trees, washlines damp with underwear and trousers and dresses; dozing horses outside the saloon. Glendon looked down and counted the saloon, the hotel, the bank. Buck's statement: "This town was all McMan."

"Get down," Buck said. "Whiskey ain't no good, but it cuts the dust."

"You go on," Glendon said. "I'll get a room."

"Just come along," Buck grinned. "Everything is courtesy of McMan."

Looking up, Glendon noted that the largest building was divided into a hotel, cafe and store, with glass windows on the second floor above the cafe marking the offices of C. B. Adams, attorney at law, and Sam McMan. Glendon untied his gear and followed Buck, toward the hotel, and the saloon, an archway gave off to the hotel lobby and, as Buck shouted greetings to a filled poker table, Glendon passed through to the desk. He signed for a room, dropped his gear, and rejoined Buck at the bar.

Buck was sitting beside a red-haired man and he began telling how he'd left the Cross C with old John Joring like a motherless calf. Buck exclaimed, "I bet that's the red-haired man you met abruptly as Buck spoke to the red-haired man."

"Ed, when do we start? I'm broke, foot-loose and eager."

Buck said curly, "Don't savvy you," and prepared to ride. Buck laughed, the same cheerful sound Glendon had heard in the Cross C cookhouse. His voice boomed above the sound of scraping chairs as he said, "Set down," and froze them in place. In the moment Glendon read the trust in their faces. The young man who cared nothing for anything or anyone was the strongest here. He laughed and they wanted no part of whatever lay hidden

behind his smiling face. Glendon spoke in the silence.

"Private business for you, Buck. See you later."

"Pat, you don't need to go," Buck said. "You won't tell no tales out of school."

"Your friends don't know me," Glendon said. "I'd feel the same way."

"Bueno," Buck said carelessly. "But remember, I ain't showed you around town yet."

Glendon stepped behind Buck's chair and, on impulse, dropped a hand on the thick shoulder. Buck grinned up at him and Glendon understood that quick smile. He had made a friend, whether he knew it or not. Then Glendon had his gear and took the stairs to the second floor and the last room at the end of the hall. The management had thoughtfully provided a tin wash basin and one galvanized bucket of water. Glendon took a hand bath, shaved, put on clean clothes going back downstairs he found himself hurrying and that was foolish. He was going nowhere; he had all the time in the world. He stopped at the desk to borrow a handful of matches, and moved on to the porch and looked at the town. Steps clattered down the stairs between hotel and cafe; a plump little porter pigeon of a man dressed in blue trousers and a solid blue shirt emerged from the stairwell and stopped beside Glendon, mopping his red face with an equally solid handkerchief.

"A scorchin'," he said.

"Get much hotter here?" Glendon asked.

"This is only June," the little man said with in-

Born in Colorado, Frank O'Rourke and his wife now live in Minnesota, but spend a great part of each year traveling, gathering material for a new book, "The Westerner," the many novels and short stories he has written. Though his writing is usually in the Western or sports field, Mr. O'Rourke is a music lover; he and his wife are collectors of first and rare editions of books.

tense feeling. "In July the hinges melt, in August the devil arrives for his vacation in our fair land. Excuse me for noticing the apparent, but you are new in our town."

"Today," he said.

"The name is Adams," the little man said. "I'm pleased to meet you. In fact, I'm pleased to meet anyone new in Fort Ellis."

"Glendon," he said.

Adams had a sharp handclasp and sharper eyes that examined Glendon while he lit a cigar and tattered on his heels. "Just passing through, Mr. Glendon?"

"Looking around," he said. "Is there a lively barn handy?"

"Right down the street," Adams said. "This side. I recommend it highly."

Glendon stepped off the porch and led the brown horse 50 steps to a cavernous barn that promised both shade and coolness. The hostler led the brown horse into the shadowy alleyway depths and Glendon stood in the door shade, swallowing all of Fort Ellis in one glance. Across the street, Mann's buildings was another store—Leslie's by the sign—and the post-office and a barbershop with its rickety candy-striped pole. Abutting the lively barn was a harness and saddle shop; and these buildings encompassed the total business in Fort Ellis. Glendon walked away from the shabbiness and the heat. He came to the riverbank and descended the cutbank grade scraped out by fresco and team, and turned north along the river under the cottonwoods that formed their umbrellas over the lower willows. Water snored and grunted beneath the bank, a thin stream no more than 30 yards.

He rolled a cigaret and flipped his match upstream into the dark current; and saw the red bobber below an overhanging willow branch that touched water and formed a silent fan of ripples. The line rose from bobber to a willow pole, and the pole was held by a fisherman sitting on a rock, head now turned from the water, watching him in silent amusement. Glendon removed his hat. He began to nod, grinning at the fish. He began a retreat, but the fisherman said, "No luck anyway. Guess it's too hot today."

There was no resentment in her voice. Glendon passed gratefully and found old memories of his life in the Elkhorn. "How deep is it?" he asked.

"About five feet," she said. "Deeper under the cutbanks. I'm using worms."

"I grew up that way," Glendon said. "Willow pole and a can of worms."

"In the Elkhorn?"

"Nebraska," Glendon said. "The Elkhorn, the Platte, the Niobrara."

"I fished the Republican," she said. "But that was a long time ago."

She had a narrow, oval face crowned with a thick hair of chestnut hair that shimmered when the leaf sunlight trembled downward through the cottonwoods. Her forehead was high, her eyes brown, her nose quite well set with a cartilage bump on the vaguely arched bridge. Her mouth was full and wide, her chin well set and stubborn above the browned v of her man's blue shirt and slender, rounded body. She wore velvet and boots, and the chestnut hair was pinned behind her ears in two fat braids. Her face was sober and plain and she smiled at her own words; then it came alive with interest as she said, "You're new in town?"

"Yes," he said. "Sorry I bothered you."

"No bother," she said. "You've stirred up a dull day."

"Why is that?" Glendon asked.

"Not a man in town fishes here," she said, "let alone come down. I doubt they know a fish from a sausage. You'll be a marked man from the word go. Very conspicuous."

He saw the glint of laughter and smiled in return. He replaced his hat, touched it respectfully, and went away to the road. A strange town housing people of Buck's kind, lawyers like C. B. Adams, and the unseen McMan. Not to mention this woman in man clothing fishing on a hot afternoon, undisturbed by his invasion of her privacy. Her action was made stranger when he remembered the gold wedding band on her left hand; it took a different sort of woman to go to fishing with a house and family depending on her guidance. Glendon came once more to the lively barn and paused in the welcome shade to look again at the town and pull his ragged thoughts together.

He had left Kansas two weeks ago with a headful of plans. A man always had plans; for those ideas came all of life. But a man would not worship his plans, for he knew better as they came, like shirts and pants, the best of each into his life. The point in question, it seemed, was whether he would ever have a worth-while idea, find a spot on earth that seemed to fit his needs. He had to stop somewhere, if only for a little while, and face the truth: he had nothing before him. But if all a man faced was nothingness, if all he had done in the past came down to that dismal present, then a man had to fight against nothingness itself. Glendon wiped the sweat from his face; this was as good as any place on earth to rest and plan.

CHAPTER II

SWIFT STAMM was 27 years old, her first name a legacy from the grandfather on her father's side. Her father, a doctor, had never borne his name. The name, like a good shoe, seemed to fit more comfortably with the passing years. She was a tomboy, her mother's despair, for even in young womanhood she preferred pants and shirts to dresses. She was a strong woman, choked not only a woman's body but her very thoughts.

Swift Stamm married a young lawyer at the age of 19. Her marriage was longest the longest of the flu epidemic and the death of her parents; and Bill Stamm had grown up, across the backyard fence, gone off to college, and come home to renew his easy friendship with the solitary girl become a woman. For her it was long love, long dream, long expectation; it was necessity. For Bill Stamm it was the nature of the times and a lack of more eligible girls. Bill Stamm was a pleasant young fellow then, but age changes all.

Two years ago Bill Stamm had one drink too many and laid his thick, harsh tongue on the wrong man. They brought the sad news to Swift; now she lived on in Fort Ellis, doing bookwork for Adams and McMan, living alone and evidently enjoying the view. She had few friends among the stiffer necks, but she was well-liked by children and older people. She spent a good many hours fishing, riding out along the river, reading books and tending her garden.

She would her line around the willow pole and stuck the hook into the bobber. She walked the

hot road to her small house a 100 yards behind the business block, and passed through the arbor gate into her private world.

She set the fishing pole against the porch rail and entered the house that offered comfort, if nothing more. She changed into a pair of slacks, a cotton dress, gave her braids a tug, and went unhesitatingly across the back lot to the hotel. She had an hour's work on Adams' books; and McMan had undoubtedly discovered something new since dinner.

McMann was in his late 50's, very much the retired major of cavalry, complete with short curly hair, rufous moustache, round stomach that seemed like a shield, stubby legs protruding from black boots; and those straight military shoulders held firmly in line. McMann wore black and gray suits with white broadcloth shirts and black string bow ties, his vest crossed with a gold chain holding the repeater watch and lodge pin. His army ring glinted on his left fourth finger, too deeply embedded in the fat creases to ever be removed in life; and while he carried no visible arm, Swift Stamm was familiar with the hip-pocket holster and the bulldog '38 hidden beneath his coat.

McMann faced the world smugly from stern features that matched the set of his shoulders, his face highlighted by the cropped sandy hair and moustache, with tiny crumpled spots of red fattening the curves of his cheeks. His eyes were sharp blue, his teeth lay yellowish behind thin red lips, his jaw was a block of granite above his thick neck. McMann gave absolute pause to the legend that old soldiers just faded away; he gave, instead, the feeling that he might never die, that age was only a minor irritant in his path, through immortal life.

McMann walked in military fashion, short arms swinging precisely at his sides. He rode in the same way and he spoke in only one tone—the brusque, clipped words of a man accustomed to give orders and expecting no argument. As yet, by the very nature of his business in Fort Ellis, he received and absorbed a plethora of such talk from men who had no appreciation, let alone awe, for the military. With these men, McMann's temper and his fury and argued fluently in Spanish or English, plus a third language composed of free-swinging Elizabethan protinity that did more to control his rough colleagues than all the studied arguments in the world. McMann never failed to capitalize on this talent when other methods failed.

McMann had built his empire on simple cornerstones: his army career which gave him invaluable connections, and his unequalled knowledge of Fort Ellis which, combined with cash and the legal might of C. B. Adams, enabled him to back up his desires. Few men had needed more in history. McMann was strong enough to succeed with either one of the two; and having both he was, at the moment, unbeatable. Even John Colter could not dent McMann's position, and John Colter was cut from the same monolithic granite. Swift Stamm knew all this, and more, as she gave her employers a wave and turned up the stairway between cafe and hotel. She passed from view and McMann, having doffed his hat, resumed his conversation with C. B. Adams. McMann had been upstairs a few minutes earlier, watching Glendon enter the hotel; now he mused on the name.

"Glendon—the name is vaguely familiar."

"I'll have his luggage inspected," Adams said.

"Use Felipe," McMann said, "but we'll find nothing. If he is official, his breed is too smart for that."

"We can try," Adams said. "Have you seen Ed and young Buck?"

"Not yet."

"Buck quit Cross C last night," Adams said. "I wonder how old John took that alum pill," McMann smiled.

"If I were Colter," Adams said, "I would never have allowed Buck to leave me."

"Hogwash," McMann said. "He's just another reckless young fool. I know, he's killed three men. That makes him stupid plus reckless, ideal for our purpose. But not that bad. Ed's the best of the bunch."

"You think so?" Adams asked.

"Compare their records," McMann said. "As you might phrase it, counsellor, Ed has precedent going in his favor."

"Sam," Adams said quietly. "That boy in there is a cyclone, a tornado. He doesn't know it yet, you don't, no one seems to smell the danger in that. But I do, and why? Because it is my business to read people."

McMann threw his cigar into the street. He said, "Could be," and went through the hotel lobby and down the back hall to a large, bare room facing upon the rubbish-choked yard. A narrow door opened into the saloon's storage room; it made possible a shield against privacy for certain meetings. Waiting for Buck and Ed Bailey, McMann fingered a fresh cigar. The door opened, Ed Bailey lit Buck inside, both sank gingerly into the chairs across the battered table. McMann studied Buck while lighting, drawing, and expelling cigar smoke.

"You," he said. "Quit the Cross C, eh?"

"Last night," Buck said lazily. "Figure on taking some money home easy money from you."

McMann said curly, "You are too trash and outspoken. Let us understand that now and hereafter."

"Oh, I savvy," Buck smiled. "You want some more Cross C crows?"

"I will be in the market for 500 head two weeks from today."

"What price, major?" Ed Bailey asked.

"The same," McMann said. "Delivery at my pens across the river."

"Buono," Ed Bailey said. "Come on, Buck. Let's have one last drink and get to work."

McMann did not allow himself a move until the two men had closed the door. He brought the flat hand down viciously. Dangerous? He wondered if Colter had deliberately foisted Buck off on him; if so, old John was probably laughing fit to kill.

CHAPTER III

GLENDON lay on his lumpy mattress in the early dusk, and, exhausted, he puzzled thoughts once more. He had come from the river and dozed until now, at dusk, his stomach proved more sensible than his thoughts. Glendon rubbed his face and took the stairs. He had decided to stay awhile.

He passed through the lobby into the cafe and ate his meal at the rear table. C. B. Adams found him there and plumped down wearily. "Rootbeer," Adams told the waitress, "and be generous with the ice, Rosie." Then Adams rubbed his chin and smiled. "The heat gets me. Well, what have you decided about our fair city?"

"I'd stay awhile," Glendon said, "if I could rent a place."

Adams erected a finger steeple of momentary thought. The waitress brought his drink and Adams stared at the straw chaff floating on the dark brown liquid. He said, "Four houses available, one decent. North of here toward the river, dirty, unfurnished, no window glass, the well needs cleaning. A shed for your horse, a backyard."

"And the owner?"

"Adams and Adams," Adams smiled. "I represent him, and I'll not argue rent. You name a figure, I'm apt to snap you up."

"Half-joking, Glendon said. "How about \$5?"

"That," Adams said. "A ridiculous price of course, but the house itself is ridiculous. If you have the courage to clean and furnish it, \$5 a month is sufficient. . . are you thinking of staying on permanently?"

"I can't say," Glendon said. "What time will you be up tomorrow?"

"Eight," Adams said. "Meet me at breakfast."

"What about the rent?"

"You have two stores," Adams said. "The major's, and Mr. Leslie's across the street."

Glendon paid his tab and went outside to the south end of the porch and smoked a cigar in the deepening night. The bitch rails were deserted, the saloon was quiet for such an early hour. Buck and his friends had departed while Glendon took siesta. The day of it for a man in a strange town, the night hours dragged and went on nothing to occupy mind and body. Glendon dropped his cigar and turned through the lobby to the stairs. He hoped one of the stores had fish line and bobbers and hooks.

CHAPTER IV

CHARLEY LESLIE entered his general store and prowled the aisles, pussy-footing around his janitor's damp mop strokes. He concluded his inspection at the front window, through which he saw the stranger just who he had nothing to do. Charley Leslie had his own grapevine that, last night, brought him news of Glendon's

arrival. If Glendon was another McMann import he would not bother to cross the street; if he was a loner truly interested in low prices he'd come visiting shortly. Charley Leslie massaged his clean-shaven jaw and waited patiently.

He was a handsome man with stiff, austere features. He had slipped into town six months ago, bought the vacant building from McMann's bankrupt competitor, laid in an excellent stock, and squandered for awhile on the commercial. McMann had learned absolutely nothing about his past, beginning with the opening gambit that backfired. Swift Stamm came over to purchase needles, and Charley Leslie framed that she worked for McMann.

"What does the major wish to know?" Leslie had asked.

"How long can you last," Swift said, "once he starts cutting prices?"

"As long as he can," Charley Leslie smiled. "Tell him I relish competition."

He had laughed with him, and they got along famously. He was on a dangerous job and dared not make mistakes, yet he did. Knowing that John Colter hated everyone connected with McMann, Leslie had been in love. At least he was quite certain of his feeling; it was the warmest sensation he had ever experienced. In his own civil fashion he tried to express tender sentiments but, save pleasant friendship, Swift gave him no encouragement. He had had a long for four months. McMann had cut prices, learned that Leslie could not be broken, and raised prices to the old level. Thereafter Charley Leslie made a firm practice of underbidding McMann's store on every item. He became friendly with C. B. Adams and enjoyed many a good argument in the cafe; and he gained McMann's grudging respect by pandering cleverly to the major's vanity. He addressed McMann by the military title, he asked questions about battles and tactics and famous generals, he built up their interest in him while doing his own job in perfect style.

When Swift Stamm recognized his work to her: he was the only man in town worthy of her time.

He thought of her now as Glendon crossed the street and entered his store. Charley Leslie introduced the stranger to Adams and followed Glendon around the aisles, jolting down each item mentioned, learning that Glendon's house would be cleaned by noon and he wanted to move in at once. Charley Leslie stepped to the front counter, finished checking prices, and quoted each article a bit under McMann's rates.

"You're cheaper," Glendon said.

"I make a fair profit," Leslie said mildly. "I am not in business to fleece my customers."

"I'll take the lot," Glendon said. "Can you haul it over early this afternoon?"

"Yes," Leslie said. "Now, is there anything else?"

"Have you got fishing tackle?"

"A small stock."

"I want line, bobbers, sinkers, hooks."

"Charley Leslie smiled. "I don't believe it."

"Another fisherman," Leslie said. "I never thought it would happen in Fort Ellis."

"Are you the other one?"

"Yes," Leslie said. "Swift Stamm is my fisherman. She never gives up but she catches fewer fish than anyone I know."

"Catching is the least of it," Glendon said. "What's the total?"

Leslie added the total, accepted cash, and made the small change. Glendon departed as quickly as he came, and Leslie went straight to the warehouse loading dock and ordered the list to Manuel who waited for the important words.

"Deliver this," Leslie said. "Then go on out. Tell Colter that Glendon is not McMann's boy. Ed Bailey took Buck and that creep upriver yesterday which means trouble in the hills. Nothing else at present except we needn't worry about Glendon."

"No?"

"He's not looking for trouble," Leslie said. "He's a fisherman."

"He would not dodge it," Manuel said. "He has that look."

"What look?" Leslie said impatiently. "You are always judging a man by his look. The face tells nothing."

"He is it," Manuel said doggedly. "Adios, senior."

Leslie stood alone after Manuel had gone. How much longer would Colter play this silly game. Bringing him down here from the north, backing

him in the store, asking nothing more vital than belated information on McMan's actions. Not even being that cattle were being sold as the sun rose, just receiving Manuel's skimpy facts and doing nothing. Six months of it had shortened Leslie's temper and sharpened his appetite for big money. If Colter made no definite move within two months, he would try a deal with McMan or leave the country.

* * *

The house was clean, the furniture was installed, the shelves were stocked with food. Glenn started a fire in the cookstove, boiled coffee, and drank in reflective silence, standing in the back door that faced the river. He rinsed the cup, took up the shining new shovel, and went hunting in the earth beneath the sage hedge. He spotted a few scrawny worms, gathered his tackle, and walked to the river. Remembering Swift Stamm, he moved 100 yards upstream from her favorite spot in respect to her privacy.

He had worked forever, it seemed, just for this. He had \$1,000 in cash, life-savings of 36 years, enough to bring him through the summer and take him further down the road come fall. Something would turn up then; it was a matter of time who taught himself the lesson. Glenn was learning with such agonizing slowness: to stop pressing luck, let life lead the way. Glenn lay back and closed his eyes; the river gurgled at his feet and the sky darkened as a tiny wind came in. And this time she spoke first, having walked soundlessly upstream from her customary spot.

"Thought I'd find you here. Any luck?"

"No," Glenn said. "I was too busy swimming."

"Take a look."

He pulled his line and saw the bare hook, the sinker spinning lazily above the hooky. She grinned and Glenn smiled with her and at himself.

"They do that," she said. "Steel you blind, Mr. Glenn."

"Miss Stamm," he said. "Is that correct?"

"Mrs. Stamm," she said. "Charley told you she stopped by."

"Mrs. Stamm?"

"In name only. I'm a widow, Mr. Glenn." She explained casually and he considered her words while buttoning his shirt and slapping his hat against his leg. She wore the wedding ring but the widow part explained a good deal.

"You picked a good house," she said. "Did Maria mean it?"

"You can eat off the floor," Glenn said.

"I'm your neighbor," she said. "The house just south of you, the one with the big cottonwoods."

He said, "That's fine," and wondered why he spoke the banal words. He rose and wrapped his line and gave his hat a tug. "Getting late," he said, and when he turned from the river she walked easily beside him. He touched his hat, preparatory to wishing her goodnight, but she pointed her pole toward the cottonwoods and said, "Come in for coffee, Mr. Glenn. You can't have a house-warming so let's do the next best thing."

"Thank you," Glenn said.

"Neighbors?" she asked. "You're my neighbor now. Are you turning down my offer?"

"No," Glenn said. "If you don't care about the neighbors, why tell you the truth—I never did care what they thought."

"That's why I invited you," she smiled. "I never did either. Come in."

He followed her through the back gate, around the garden plot, into the small kitchen that gleamed from white-washed walls when she lit the lamp and trimmed the wick. She put coffee on and brought cups, sliced a yellow pound cake, set out a dish of apricots, poured the coffee, and sat across the table, talking all the while about the heat and the town and the fact she hoped he was hungry because cake dried out so fast in this country. Then, with a cup, she said solemnly, "I thought you, Mr. Glenn, and Mr. Glenn. I thought you should know that."

"Why?" he said. "Is it a sin?"

"Because you are a stranger in town," she said, "and always receive orders from the major to cross-examine every stranger."

"That's why you invited me in?" he asked.

"No," she smiled. "I never obey the major's orders. He knows it, but he keeps trying. You like to fish and that's enough reason to know you. Fort Ellis is a dull town, Mr. Glenn, and Charley Leslie is the only other person I can talk with.

I am sounding you out for the major, and I'm not. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Glenn said. "It wasn't necessary to explain."

"It was," she said. "You'll soon get acquainted; you'll hear from others that I'm the major's spy. I'd rather tell you myself. Then, too, you can't sit a rail here. You're either for the major or against him. If you're against him, then you will be moving on as soon as he gets around to you."

"Even if I have no axe to grind?" Glenn said.

"The major will give you an axe," she said. "Then he'll grind it. . . . When were you last in Kansas?"

Suddenly he realized that she was lonely, she needed someone who saw, with her, the country where her memories were buried. Good or bad, it was always a blessing to have someone who shared those memories, even a stranger. Well, he was not exactly a stranger to her now, because he did know Kansas. And he could tell her a few things about being lonely in a crowd. He ate half his slice of cake and said quietly: "When was I last in Kansas? About three weeks ago."

"How is it this year along the Republican?" she asked.

"Back there?" Glenn asked. "Mighty good . . . thank you. I believe I will have another slice."

CHAPTER V

TWENTY miles west of the river and 30 miles north of Fort Ellis, Buck lay beside the cookstove and listened to Ed Bailey pair the boys off for tomorrow. It would be a rough, killing time but nothing a man couldn't take cheerfully, running down 500 head of Colter's cattle. Then a leisurely drive south to McMan's place, the payoff in cash, and a month of fun. Buck grinned sleepily at the fire. They'd patronize McMan a couple of days, just for looks and ride north to Sherman where nobody asked questions and a dance would be held every Saturday night.

"Ed," Buck said. "Let's go up to Sherman, eh?"

"Fandango?"

"I was there once," Buck said. "Met a nice little girl."

"Mex?"

"Sure," Buck said. "Married, but she gave me the eye. I ought to return the favor. How many head can we gather tomorrow?"

"Enough," Ed Bailey said. "You and me are taking the big canyon, the others'll circle out and drive into us. We'll sweat, brother, but the payoff's worth the time. Let's hit the sack. Long day comin'."

Buck lay back and watched the stars. He thought ahead to the payoff, the dance, and that girl. But no further. He hoped Glenn had stayed in Fort Ellis; maybe he could persuade Pat to come along to Sherman.

* * *

The summer wore and the heat increased. Glenn lived a quiet life that circumscribed no more than grocery shopping and fishing along the river, his only companions Swift Stamm, and occasionally, safe talk with C. B. Adams. As the heat rose Glenn spent more time on the river. Swift was there, too, and they talked together under the cottonwoods and walked homeward to have coffee and talk. Glenn spoke only when she offered him the chance, and they got along fine. Glenn slept late and ate small, fished the river, watched the mercury climb as June shriveled its string. Two weeks after Buck left town, Glenn looked up from his bobber and saw a dust smoke in the air. He bled from the hills, saw the trail half hour later he counted the trail herd as it wound into McMan's pens. He wrapped his line and walked home, curious about those cattle in the river.

He wondered if they were branded, or clean, or if the long iron had worked them over; he wondered how many days they would stay in full view of the world. It seemed incredible that Colter allowed such open theft. Further north such bald-faced rustling would start a war bigger than any banana republic revolution. Glenn ate a cold supper, shaved his sun-browned face, and walked upstairs. He barely cleared the saloon doors when Buck came shouting from the bar to squeeze him in a sweaty bearhug and yell happily. "Heard you stayed. Come on now, Pat. I'll buy you a drink!"

"One drink," Glenn said. "It's good to see you, Buck."

"Come to see you," Buck grinned. "Pat, what you been doing?"

"Loafing," he said. "Just plain loafing."

"An' us working like dogs," Buck said. "But we sure got paid for our trouble. Listen, we're going upriver in a couple days. Want to come along?"

"Where to?" he asked.

"Sherman," Buck said. "There's a saloon, an' girls, an' a dance on Saturday night."

"I'll let you know tomorrow," Glenn said. "Go back to that poker game."

He gave Buck a slap and pushed him toward the door. Ed Bailey sat, shuffling cards, watching them moodily. They hadn't shaved or washed yet, they were drinking and reaching out for their fun in sweat-soaked clothes, in dusty beards and leather-cracked boots. It went that way for men who worked so hard that time was quicksilver between their fingers, slipping from them faster than they reached. Glenn went through the hotel to the cafe, ordered coffee, and tried a sweet roll. He was hunched over his cup, anticipating night's first coolness, when he heard the shot.

Glenn rose without volition, an old war horse responding to conditioned reflexes. He checked his advance midway through the hotel lobby, walked slowly toward the back door. He had seen the men were crowded in a thick circle facing the bar. Boots drummed on the porch boards and burst inside with a sharp command from the owner, "Stand back!" All those crowding men opened ranks, some spilling backward against Glenn. One was Joe Jones, the night man at the lively bar.

"What happened?" Glenn asked.

"Buck," Jones said. "Some fool got drunk and Buck shot him!"

"Dead?"

"You heard one shot, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"That's all Buck ever takes. Sure he's dead and here's the major roaring mad!"

Glenn had lived two weeks in Fort Ellis and failed to find a man. He had seen the men on the street and riding past, but never in action. Curiosity made him edge into the saloon and along the wall until he had a clear view of the scene. He saw the men in the room, sprawled, some spilling a bar spittoon and a broken glass. Buck stood at the end of the bar, elbows on the knurled rail, and McMan had marched forward midway between the body and Buck. C. B. Adams came bustling inside at the moment, skirts around the body, and stood alertly beside McMan.

"Well," McMan said curtly. "What happened?"

"He up and started trouble," Buck said. "I had to take him."

"Price?"

"Yessir, major?" the prim bartender said.

"Is that true?"

"Yessir," Prince said. "Nothing else Buck could do. This fellow was drunk and mean, he just started cussing Buck and went for his gun."

"Self-defence?" McMan said.

"Yessir," Prince said. "Can't be nothing else."

Glenn looked at the civilian man in the room, the fort, McMan said furiously. "Here to inspect beef tomorrow. Evidently you killed in self-defence, Buck, but you might use better judgment. Do you know what this means?"

"Well," Buck said easily. "I reckon you'll have to find another beef inspector. I'll volunteer. I know them cows pretty well."

A ripple of laughter travelled the edge of the room and choked off abruptly as McMan glared at the crowd. He began a speech, though bare of his words, and nodded to Adams. "Take care of it," he said, and marched straight-shouldered from the saloon into the hall.

"Prince, take this body to the icheuse, bring all the effects to my office. Gentlemen, return to your pleasures."

"That's all?" Buck asked.

"The verdict is self-defence," Adams said. "But let me remind you that friends of the deceased are upstairs. I suggest you get out of town, Buck."

"How many friends?" Buck asked.

"Ten."

"Tell them to get out of town," Buck said.

"Buck," Adams said sharply. "Take a ride!" Adams walked briskly from the saloon as the bartender tolled off half a dozen unwilling nails, beams and began the clean-up work. Before the bar door slammed the games were under way, the bottles were tilted, the pool table was echoing to the

cue balls click. Glendon turned into the lobby beside Joe Jones and put his thoughts into words: "That's how they do it here?"

"Legal and above board," Jones said. "Clear case of self-defence."

"No sheriff," Glendon said. "No marshal or coroner?"

"Adams is both."

"Both what?"

"Coroner and J. P." Jones said. "No charges, no trouble. You heard him."

Glendon said, "Yes, I heard him," and walked from the lobby and stood deeply troubled in the porch shadows. He did not doubt that Buck had shot in self-defence, but the law in Fort Ellis was plainly a mockery. Glendon wanted to go home and forget tonight but, more strongly, he stood rooted on the porch and waited for Buck.

* * *

McMann roamed the upstairs office, venting his spleen on the walls and desk. They had finished a stormy session with the colonel's representative from the fort, packed that man and the two remaining drovers off to bed, and sat now in mutual anger.

"The fool!" McMann said for the tenth time. "The brainless young fool!"

"I agree," Adams said tonelessly, "but he was provoked."

"Who cares?" McMann said bitterly. "With 50 blockheads he could shoot, why does he pick a man from the fort?"

"I told you," Adams said.

"You told me what?"

"He's a killer," Adams said. "He's dangerous, he'll be worse in a few weeks."

"And I'll have the colonel on my neck at noon," McMann grumbled.

"Can't you handle him?"

"Of course I can handle him!" McMann said. "But he'll insist that we show some semblance of law in town. I can talk him out of that. I think, but tell Bailey I will give permission."

"Gladly," Adams said, "but I doubt it will matter."

"Why not?"

"If Buck decides to visit us," Adams said, "he will come a-calling. As for law, you have an experienced marshal honoring us with his presence."

"Chuglun Glendon," McMann smiled, mirthlessly. "I told you I had a feeling about him."

"Then see him," Adams said. "Sound him out. Perhaps he needs money. Maybe he'll take orders."

"You read the ledger," McMann said. "He's one of those honest fools. Exactly the kind I don't want within 50 miles of here. And lost his nerve, to boot. Oh, I'll talk to him, don't worry. I'll give him a week to clear out."

CHAPTER VI

MANUEL MARTINEZ crouched behind the warehouse dock and spoke to the thick-set man beside him. Other men guarded the dock corners and, deeper to the east behind the corral, more men waited with the horses. John Colter listened silently while Manuel talked, showing remarkable calm in the face of bad news. He did not speak until Manuel finished, then he said, "Leslie see it?"

"No, senor. He was home."

"An' Buck was ordered out of town?"

"Yes, senor. They will go to Sherman. I heard them say so earlier."

"Let 'em go," Colter said.

"And here?" Manuel said. "What of your cattle, senor? Five hundred head. That is too much to swallow!"

"Just stretch your big mouth a little wider," Colter said. "It ain't time yet. I'll tell you when."

"Very well, senor."

"Now watch Leslie close," Colter said. "I think he's getting ready and nervous both."

"He is that, senor."

"An' watch close if he makes a pass at McMann or Adams," Colter said. "He ain't jumped that way yet, but he might."

"Not yet," Manuel said. "He stays to himself."

"Unnatural," Colter said. "There's more to that hombre than he shows. Adios."

"Adios, senor."

Charley Leslie was half dressed when the shooting occurred. He slipped on his trousers and soft leather slippers, and circled through the back lots

to the saloon where he crouched at the rear window above the cellar door and watched the activity inside. He was forced to decamp when the bartender's crew headed for the icheuse with the body. Leslie moved off to the north, crossed the road, and came back along an adobe wall toward the rear of his store. Stopping at the wall corner he heard the soft voices and crouched before Colter's guard saw him. He could not distinguish in divided words but he recognized Colter's rumble and Manuel's softer bass. Leslie waited until Colter and his crew were gone, and Manuel had strolled off toward the street; then he stood and shook himself free of wet dog.

"Manuel!" Leslie whispered. "That double-crossing—"

They were cooking up something behind his back, and the only possible scheme was directed against McMann. But why do so without explaining such a plan to him? He could only infer that he was about to become the clay pigeon between two factions. He was only guessing, of course, but from tonight forward he dared not stand still and wait for an explosion. A smart idea, he thought, and always feathered his nest in midair. Charley Leslie circled wide to the south and came around into the lively barn through the back door, up the alley, to the office where the night man slept in a cot beside the desk. The night man, Joe Jones, had drifted into town a month after Leslie's arrival and got the barn job without trouble. Jones woke quietly when Leslie whispered, "Joc," through the screen door.

"Charley?"

"Don't get up," Leslie said. "Listen."

"Fire away, Charley."

Leslie spoke rapidly for 10 minutes. When he paused for breath, Jones sat up on the cot and rubbed his head sleepily. "Let me hear this," he said.

"We're in the middle and we've got to get ready for a fast jump. We'll need a wagon and good team, have to load our stock at night and me close town with it before daylight. Take it down the road, sell in any town between here and El Paso. Right?"

"Right," Leslie said. "Go on."

"Then come back and stay out of sight until you give the word."

"I don't know when this will break," Leslie said. "Meanwhile watch everything and everybody. I'll have more to go on in a few days. Good-night, Joe."

"Good-night, Charley."

Leslie left the barn as quietly as he came, padded back to his house, and undressed in darkness. He had promptly obeyed one cardinal rule of the game: protect your flanks by enriching your pockets as you took the fastest route out of trouble. But that move could take place only after Colter made a previous move, and Leslie himself counted by testing McMann. And even then he took a chance if something was set to explode between the two. No matter, he thought, if they want a game he'd give them all the run for their money.

* * *

When Buck was turning off the porch for home where Buck and Ed Bailey appeared suddenly beside him. He wondered how Buck felt and could not see the face clearly in the darkness; and then Buck touched his arm.

"Be leaving tonight, Pat. Come on along!"

"Come down to the house," Glendon said. "Take a bath before you go."

"Get up behind me," Buck said happily. "Ed, let's take a bath and get us a good wash."

Glendon mounted behind Buck and guided them through the back lots to his house. While they tied their horses Glendon lit his lamp, put the wash boiler on the fire, and carried water. Then Buck entered carrying his blanket roll.

"First come, first served," Glendon said. "I'll have coffee in a jiffy."

Ed Bailey trailed inside reluctantly and stepped against the wall and watched Buck pour a basin of warm water and start shaving in Glendon's mirror. When the boiler bubbled and Buck carried a bucketful outside to wash, Bailey came forward to facing them. He kept his eyes on Glendon, who was flickering glance on Bailey was a suspicious man, years deeper in their game, a man who had learned his lessons the dangerous, dirty way and gave no lead rope to any man he did not totally understand.

"You coming along?" Bailey asked.

"No," Glendon said.

"Glendon," he said, "are you level with Buck?"

"All the way," Glendon said. "I've got no bone to pick. What's on your mind, Ed?"

"Buck," Bailey said softly. "He likes you."

"I like him," Glendon said simply. "Is that a crime?"

"Enough to throw in with us?"

"No," he said. "I'm not the style for your game, Ed."

"He wants to be your friend," Bailey said. "It can cause him trouble. How can you be amigous and stay outside?"

"I don't know," Glendon said. "but I won't preach to him. He can visit me any time. I'll cause him no trouble. He's never worked it out before, maybe he can do the same."

Ed Bailey said, "Maybe—" and shut his mouth as Buck came into the kitchen and began rubbing dry on his dirty shirt.

"Feels good," Buck grinned. "Go seek yourself, Ed."

Bailey dried his razor carefully, coaxed it, and carried a fresh bucket of hot water outside.

"Well," Buck said. "You coming?"

"No," he said. "Can you savvy why?"

"Yes," Buck said. "You don't want to choose cows or ride with us, an' that's all right. I never forced a man, for no man forces me. If you came along, we'd have some fun but no more. But it would be like you just run for your life."

"No," Glendon said. "But any time you want to come here, you and I could do with riding out and seeing this country, Buck."

"I'll find time for that," Buck smiled.

Bailey appeared in the door, buttoning his shirt, slipping back his wet hair. Bailey said, "Thanks, Glendon. Sure appreciate it. Buck, time to go."

Glendon heard them walk the horses away toward the road where other men waited. Their heel echoed in the night, one last defiant shout floated back, wild and free, and they were gone.

Glendon lifted the boiler off the stove and replaced it with the milk, was pouring coffee when Swift came knocking and entered. Glendon said, "Excuse the muss," and motioned to the coffee pot.

"I'll have a cup," Swift said, "I started over a while ago but you had company."

"Buck and Ed Bailey," he said. "Shaved, took a bath, just left for Sherman, wherever that is."

"Upriver," Swift said. "Pat, I heard a shot. What happened?"

"He is here, pouring coffee and filling a plate with cookies she had baked two days ago. She sat at his table and spoke her blunt thoughts: 'How do you know them?'"

"Buck and Ed," he said. "I met Buck at Cross C."

He told her of the meeting, and some of his liking for Buck colored his voice, for her hand lifted and he saw the puzzlement.

"I know, Buck," she said, "and the rest of that crew. Do you know what Adams thinks of Buck?"

"I can guess," Glendon said. "Adams would call him a killer, probably wants to get rid of him."

"Adams has too close for comfort," Swift said. "Adams has told me how he feels. How do you feel about Buck?"

"Buck's a funny boy," Glendon said. "I don't know where he came from, what's behind him, but he's got a real sense of humor. He's got a sense of all laughs and fun, having a good time. He's generous, if he likes a man he makes a friend, and I think he values friendship because he hasn't had much of it of late. That's the real good side."

Buck's riding a rail and he can tip either way in the time it takes to say the word. I've seen it happen before. I know how it comes to a boy like Buck. You kill a man and I hear tonight he was number four—and that works inside a boy the wrong way. Especially when it is so easy, when there's no law, and what law there is on his side. Then one day something tips the scales and he's gone, over the wrong side of the law."

"And yet you like him?" she said.

"I like him now," Glendon said. "for the good part in him. Just as I would like any man who treats me honestly, who offered me friendship with no strings."

"But if he changes," Swift said. "Goes off the wrong side of the rail as you call it. What then?"

"I don't know," Glendon said bluntly. "I can never abide a killer."

"How can you say that?" she asked.

"You're drawing me out," Glendon said. "Yes, you are, and I think you know. I've known too many killers, Swift. There is no apology for a killer, he can give no valid excuse for his action. And once he starts, he never stops. Believe me, I know."

"You should," Swift Stamm said softly. "Why do you say that?"

"I had to see you tonight," Swift said. "McMann received a letter from Kansas City this morning. I open his mail and arrange it for him. I don't need to tell you what that letter said, do I?"

"I kept hoping it wouldn't follow along," Glendon said. "Yes, I can guess what it told him, but I don't know any more."

"You have been a town marshal," Swift said. "A United States marshal, a county sheriff, a stagecoach guard. For the past 10 years, in Nebraska and Wyoming and Kansas. Last in Kansas, and you ended a mile ago because the letter stated you lost your nerve. Is that true?"

"It was a pretty good marshal, Swift. I believed in the law, in keeping the peace and giving every man a fair share of justice. I was paid for that and I like to think I gave full value. All I want now is to be left alone."

"Did you bring your shotgun?" Swift asked. "I brought one Colt and one Winchester," Glendon said.

"Then I believe you," she said. "But I still say you're a coward."

"In what way?"

"You haven't lost your nerve," she said. "I don't have to be a man to understand that. I lost my nerve two years ago, or thought I did. I was like a chicken with my head cut off for over a year. That's the way it was one day and kept it was one day, it didn't matter that I was alone. I'd been alone before Bill was shot anyway. I just didn't want to admit that. So I did, finally, and now I'm all right. That's the way it is with you, isn't it? You're looking for something and some day you'll find it and then you'll be all right again."

"Swift," he said quietly. "Don't get all worked up over me. There's no reason."

"I like you," she said. "We can talk and you don't care how I dress or what I do. You let me be what I want to be. We can sit here and talk, and I can't do that with anybody else."

"There's Leslie," he said. "He likes you a lot." "And you've seen Leslie," Swift said curtly. "Why do I talk to him? Because there was nobody else at least he doesn't—," she blushed and carried her cup to the dishpan and stayed a minute before she turned. "Charley's cold inside. He has no real feelings. Pat, don't you want to talk with me?"

"Better than anything else," he said honestly. "But don't start worrying about him. There's no future in it."

"All right," she said. "And I know you well enough to see that you're getting worried about me. I should be home like all respectable ladies. Good-night, Pat."

Glendon returned to his dirty dishes and his coffee grounds and the shreds of his own hope he had ridden so far to achieve. He sat alone around the house and packed his gear in his mind; 10 minutes and he could be on the trail. Maybe he'd have to do it in less; but thanks to Swift he was forewarned.

CHAPTER VII

HOT, burning sunlight pursued Buck and Ed into the old town slumbering near the river through the ancient cedars. The streets mendered aimlessly, the roads curled into the blankness of the compass points; and no one rushed toward life in Sherman where tomorrow would be no better than yesterday.

Buck sat at the way across the plaza into the saloon that stored delightful odors of beer and whiskey and homemade wine; and the owner, Coyote Smith, stroking his long moustaches, came forward in smiling and set up the first round on the house.

"What happened?" Coyote Smith said. "Last time there was 10 of you, with 10," Buck said. "Took our time and had us a poker game last night."

"An five of you won?"

"Si," Buck laughed. "Other five had to sell some cows over in Texas. They'll be along directly at dawn tonight."

"Big fandango," Coyote Smith said. "Same as always."

"Get somebody to take the horses," Buck said. "He walked from the saloon and around the corner to the street where he had stopped and stopped under the trees he remembered so well. He had a clear view of the house from here, 50 yards back

toward the plaza. He had walked that girl home and saw how the cottonwood towered over all others and cast a huge shadow against the night sky. She talked enough to explain that her husband was overdue from working across the river. She didn't encourage him, but she hadn't told him to stay away. Buck rolled a cigaret and watched the house; once the chimney smoke slackened off from behind, just for a moment, he saw the man leave for the plaza.

He was a young fellow, tall and thin, wearing cotton pants and a blue gingham shirt and runner boots. His teeth flashed white when he turned to smile at Glendon, he wore his hair slick and boasted one of those big saddled noses. Buck watched him out of sight with a smile of good-will; if the young fellow gave no trouble he'd be meek as a lamb himself. Buck walked slowly toward the house, ducked under the clothes line and stepped into the kitchen. She whirled from the stove with a tiny shriek, recognized him, and smiled.

"Juanita," Buck said. "You remember?"

"Buck," Juanita Lopez said. "You are back."

"Just got in," Buck said. "You coming to the dance?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "And you will be there?"

"With bells on," Buck laughed. "Do I get a dance?"

"Of course," she said. "You and your friends are always welcome here, Buck."

Buck laughed and walked whistling up the street to the plaza.

Ed was snoring when he ducked into the adjoining room and undressed. Buck slept dreamlessly through the day and woke to shake off, and dress in his clean outfit. He found Ed and the other boys in the saloon talking with people they knew, buying drinks and laughing at jokes, waiting for dance time. Buck shook hands all around, bought a round, and played concan until Coyote Smith closed. "Barracks are open," and unctious his white apron.

They trooped around the plaza to the barracks that now served as town meeting place and dance hall. Buck danced with Coyote Smith's wife and kept looking at the benches as they spun; and finally he saw her in a group of girls, her eyes laughing, her lips red, her feet tapping to the music.

"You know Juanita Lopez?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Lola Smith said. "Her husband works with us, with the sheep across the river. A good man."

"Where is he tonight?"

"He had to cross the river," Lola said. "There was some trouble."

"Too bad," Buck said. "Somebody ought to dance with her."

"Well, go," Lola smiled. "I cannot compete with the tender ones her size."

"You're my girl," Buck said.

"Oh, go on," Buck crossed the floor and stood beside her, and the girls gave him those long-lashed glances of welcome. Buck smiled at them and faced her.

"Come on," he said. "You promised."

She danced away with him, too close but moving not too far away. Buck was cautious while recalling all the steps he had learned in Chihuahua, until they were whirling with the music and she was smiling dreamily. When the set ended he took her by the corner, bowed to the other girls, and went away.

Buck danced a few sets with older women, and waited patiently until the orchestra bowed good-night. He caught Juanita in the darkness, took her arm, and guided her under the barracks. He walked beside her down the dusty street to the house, through the front door, where she turned and smiled.

"You are very kind," she said. "Thank you."

"How long does he nurse those sheep?" Buck asked.

"Oh, not long," she said. "He will be home soon."

"Nice house," Buck said.

"Buck," she said fearfully. "You must go now."

Buck closed the door and dropped the latch but he grinned as he crossed the room, watching her retreat from the table. He circled quickly and caught her, still grinning, laying his big hands on her shoulders.

One of the five missing poker players reached Sherman and pulled Ed Bailey upright in bed and told him the bad news: the five losers had cut a

bunch of cows from Colter's main herd and driven on for the Texas line. They topped a ridge and met two Colter riders head-on; one got away but the other was shot dead. Four of the losers went on with the cows; the fifth had ridden a good horse half to death getting back to Sherman. Not because the death of one meant more than a grumble to Colter; but the dead man was Colter's foreman. That quick flurry of shots had spelled the end of armed neutrality for them all.

"Roust 'em out," Bailey said.

"He found Buck's room empty and ran for Juanita Lopez's house; and arrived just in time to see her husband enter, hear the shot, and run cursing toward the door. Buck appeared immediately, backing outside with his Colt held carelessly on the darkness within. Bailey heard Juanita sobbing and caught, beneath that high-pitched sound, the groans of her husband."

Then Buck turned and nudged Bailey toward the plaza. "He laughed. 'Idiot! Imagine him pulling such a fool trick. What you doin' up so early, Ed?'"

"Getting you up," Bailey said. "We're leaving for Fort Ellis."

"But I'm not broke yet," Buck said reasonably.

"Not likely to be," Bailey said. "McMann'll be looking for us."

"What happened?"

"Steve just got in," Bailey said. "Had trouble over east, shot a Colter man."

"John's got 50 men! He won't get riled up over losing one highhead."

"He will on this one," Bailey said. "The boys shot his foreman."

★ ★ ★

A tall man with an undershot jaw and heavy, sagging jowls walked laboriously into the Cross C yard, legs quivering from a 20-mile hike. He entered the big house and brushed the protesting maid aside to roust John Colter from bed and tell the story of the first night when he and Manuel took Cross C's segundo and gave his own horse a lunge-shot that drained its life 20 miles from home. His name was Pasqual, next man in rank to the dead foreman; and he shook with anger as he spoke.

"Pat," he said. "Last week they took 500. Now more. And they shot Jack. Patron, this is too much."

"Easy, boy."

Colter broke from a fine, dreamless sleep to lose his foreman, a man known and trusted for 12 years. A lesser man would climb the ridgepole and bay like a wolf; Colter's face betrayed no emotion.

"Five of them?"

"Yes."

"Then the other five went to Sherman," Colter said. "An' ain't spent all their money yet. That's good. Pasqual, you recognize any of the five?"

"Too much dust," Pasqual said bitterly. "Then we were shooting and I had to run."

"Don't matter," Colter said. "But you're right. I guess it's time."

"Say the word, patron!"

"Get those boys from the east camp," Colter said. "Now just as open their eyes and Manuel know where they came from, what I planned. Keep it that way. Take 'em to Fort Ellis tonight and round up Manuel. Start it tomorrow morning right after breakfast. You remember how I want it?"

"I remember," Pasqual said.

"And Leslie," Colter said. "He won't know about this. Wait till he shows up, stick a gun in his hands, make sure he does his share."

"He'll yell," Pasqual said grimly.

"Boot 'em out," Colter said. "Burn the whole shebang."

"And McMann?"

"Kill him!"

Pasqual ran from the big house to saddle a horse and start his ride. John Colter climbed rheumatically into his faded overalls and patched shirt. He had planned this from the day he put Leslie into the store. Tomorrow morning 17 men would start shooting across the street in Fort Ellis; they would keep shooting until McMann was dead or decamped. Either way, it was Colter's answer to three years of open theft, given in the only language McMann understood; and the beauty of it was, Leslie would take all the blame. For the 15 men Pasqual was bringing in were all strangers, hired in Texas and kept at the east camp over a month. John Colter had paid them double wages to eat and sleep and wax fat; now they would earn their keep.

CHAPTER VIII

GLENDON did not go uptown until the following Monday; at that time, heading for the store, Swift Sammet met him outside the livery barn.

"Turn around," she said.

She led him back to the barn corner, her fingers biting urgently into his arm. Even so, he saw nothing unusual in her appearance at this hour. She often did bookwork between 6 and 7, to escape the rising day heat. Glendon tried a smile to calm her down.

"What's the matter, you hook a trout already?"

"Trouble at Sherman," she said. "McMann and Adams were talking to him all day. Buck shot another man up there Saturday night."

"Dead?"

"Buck was in a house with a girl," Swift said. "The husband came home. Buck shot him in the leg; they all came straight down here. They're in the café now."

"Why would they do that?" Glendon asked. "Shooting a man in the leg is no cause for such commotion."

"Let me get my breath," Swift said. "Pat, the reason they came back is a lot worse. I heard Bailey telling how he had a poker game on the way to Sherman. The five losers rode off to steal more Colter cattle and sell them in Texas. One of that bunch got back to Sherman yesterday morning. They met two Colter riders and killed one. He was Colter's former man named Jack Wilson. That's why Bailey brought them down so fast. You didn't know Wilson, Pat. He was the only man Colter really called his friend."

"How the roof comes off!" Glendon said.

"There's more," Swift said. "Just a few minutes ago, after Bailey talked, the major told Adams to offer you the marshal's job."

"Generous of him," Glendon said.

"Pat, it makes no difference. You've got to leave right now."

"Wait," he said.

He held her arm and looked up the deserted street at the store fronts, the hitch rails, the tiny dusty devils swirling beneath the boardwalk. He watched the silent town come alive.

"Pat," she said, "Adams will wait any minute."

His mouth shaped the words, "Very well," but his lips spoke other words that came from instinct. In that moment he saw Leslie's store windows split outward by rifle barrels, the entire store front erupt in flame, heard the roar of the shots, saw the man on the porch tumble dead into the dust below the hitch rail. Glendon said, "Get back," and threw her around the livery barn corner. He followed and pulled her along the barn wall and across the vacant lot to her house where she sank on the nearest chair and stared at him numbly.

"Into the kitchen," Glendon said. "Stay away from the windows. Be back in two minutes."

He ran from her back door, hurdled the osage hedge, and raced for his own house. He scooped up his Colt and cartridge belt, the Winchester, six boxes of ammunition from the pantry shelf; and ran, hunched over, back to Swift's. She was in the kitchen, crouched against the wall below window line. Glendon ran through, latched the front door, swung the windows mutters into the street, then walked, catching his breath, to lean the Winchester against the wall and stand beside the small north kitchen window.

"What is it?" she said. "Why—?"

"We're lucky," Glendon said—forget it. "If you had started five minutes later—just gently. That's Colter's answer, Swift, and we stay here until it's finished."

"But Charles's in his store," she said.

"We can't do a thing," Glendon said. "Listen!" The rifle fire was steady, ricochets came off wood and iron to scream overhead, sailing across the river. The opening volley had been violent; now the sound was redoubled.

"All we can do is wait," Glendon said.

"Keep walking," said Pasqual said.

Charles Leslie felt the gun and walked steadily down the centre aisle into the warehouse; and saw many men waiting in the shadows. Manuel rose up and gave a signal; the men filed around Leslie's legs, began crawling up the aisles toward the front window.

"Do you fight with us?" Manuel asked bluntly. Charles Leslie understood everything, and sil-

ently cursed himself for misjudging his time. He had never faltered in making quick decisions. He made one now, already exploring the future possibilities.

"Colter's order?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"No time," Manuel said. "Do you fight?"

"Of course," Leslie said brashly. "Let's give McMann a crawl!"

He swung back into the store and went loudly to the gun cases. He selected a rifle, began loading the magazine, and nodded toward the windows. "Going to kick them out?"

"Yes," Manuel said, from the floor.

"Then get these guns and the ammunition below window line," Leslie said. "Plenty of water in the warehouse?"

"Yes," Manuel said. "Before you came."

Leslie heard the reluctant note of approval in Manuel's voice. They understood authority, they respected a man who could keep his head. The tall one called Manuel, the short one Spanish. Manuel smiled and crawled around beside Leslie.

"What does he want?" Leslie asked.

"He told me to help you," Manuel said. "So, you see, my janitor work is not finished. Let us get the guns down."

While they worked, Leslie watched the store front. The tall man was setting his line below the windows; and across the street one of Bailey's crew stepped outside and stood in the porch shade. The tall man cocked his Winchester and raised the barrel. Passing down the last case of ammunition, Charles Leslie watched the street, completely fascinated by the scene. The tall man whispered and 15 rifles canted upward; he whispered again and 15 men canted up their knees.

"Now," the tall man cried.

The rifle barrels slashed toward both windows burst into shreds. The first volley was one deafening shot. Leslie saw the man on the porch roll lifelessly into the dust; then he was crawling across the store toward the beds and mattresses and bolt goals. He could only guess how this insane business night end; in the meantime he had no intention of stopping a bullet.

One moment Ed Bailey was sitting wearily at the car hammer, golfing with his left hand; next a slug blew the cup into flying pieces and spun the handle around his forefinger. Another slug sliced the brim of Buck's hat and killed a man in his seat. Ed Bailey dove for the lobby chair and rolled through; the others hit the deck and crawled forward, fumbling for cartridges, skinning their elbows on the splintery floor. Bailey shouted up the hotel stairway; and McMann answered his call.

McMann dropped his razor and ran to the stairhead. Ed Bailey shouted a hurried explanation and pointed across the street in emphasis.

"Cover the front. put a few men in rear!" McMann shouted.

Manuel turned and ran the length of the hall, slamming his hand heels against the doors. By actual count he had 12 men upstairs, 13 with himself; downstairs a total of 14, and Adams was shaving in his rooms behind their offices. McMann gave the order to the first man; the first man returned to his own rooms. He dressed quickly, already estimating the situation, planning his fight. For this was a battle to McMann; all the years of his life had trained him best for such moments. McMann strapped on a Colt, dropped the bulldog .38 into his hip pocket holster, and walked to the stairhead.

"Bailey! How many casualties?"

"Two," Bailey yelled, "but we're all set now, major."

"You need more men down there!"

"Sure could use 'em, major."

McMann dashed the hall. "Five of you report downstairs to Bailey! You—the first five this way!"

They clattered past him, leaving a gap upstairs, and McMann resigned the remaining seven men in rooms facing the street; and hurried down the stairhead to the side hall door leading into Adams' rooms above the café. Adams was already shaved and armed, cheerful enough to offer a smile.

"Not entirely unexpected, Ed," he said.

"Take over the warehouse," McMann said. "Move all weapons, ammunition, and blasting powder to a safe place. Issue all supplies. I'll be upstairs for the time being."

"Very well," Adams said, and then shook his head. "What's Colter's idea?"

"Simple enough," McMann said. "Pin us down, flank us from tonight. Burn us out. I would employ the same tactics."

"And if he does?"

"He cannot," McMann said. "I intend to turn the tables on those ignorant fools. I will burn that store and kill every man in it. Don't expose yourself."

"Why, Sam?" Adams said. "Your solicitude is touching."

"Solicitude?" McMann said, from the doorway. "It's too much trouble finding another lawyer."

McMann weathered the surprise attack and launched an efficient rebuttal. First, he sacked off after the first hour's fighting, and the sniping began. McMann sent two men to the hotel roof; Pasqual countered with a man on Leslie's roof behind the false front. Tizard soon McMann dispatched three men in a wide circle to kill or capture the horses in Leslie's corral. Pasqual himself greeted those men; two died and the third staggered back to the hotel with a torn arm. McMann was clever to nip the heavy time from his ice-house and build solid barricades behind his windows. In Leslie's, Manuel used every box, crate, mattress and cloth bolt for a similar purpose.

Buck had lain on his stomach in the café and exhausted himself with the roof sniper until his nostrils from gunpowder and his face turned beet red. His only consolation was knowing that the sniper was clinging to a slanting roof, shingles hot under his boots, sun above making him dizzy, wanting water and unable to take the time as he moved up and down the roof behind the false front. But the boards were either too thick for a Colt, or the sniper was lucky.

Buck went back to the store warehouse, selected a Sharps bulletproof gun, and walked out and around the corner of the store. When Pasqual's sniper rose and snapped a shot into the café, Buck steadied the buffalo gun against the corner and sent a .50-calibre slug through the door, one foot below the cornice. The rifle came sliding off the roof; the man followed, cartwheeling to the ground. Buck blew smoke from the Sharps' barrel and returned to the hotel. As he walked up the back hall the man who had been on the roof raised his head to fire and took a shot in the face. Across the street Manuel levered another cartridge into his Winchester and grinned wickedly. Buck could not see him, but he saw the dead man on the lobby floor and cursed softly. It was fit-for-fat; they were getting nowhere. Buck caught Ed Bailey's eye and motioned him back to the safety of the stairs.

"How many that make?" Buck asked.

"Five," Bailey said. "An' a couple shot up."

"No good," Buck said. "They mean business over there."

"Maybe they're gettin' better pay," Bailey said dolefully. "The major ain't said a word about that. I'd get out now if I could."

"Long live," Bailey said. "You an' me."

"Should I hit the major up again?" Bailey asked. "Might be worthwhile."

"Oh, sure," Buck smiled. "If he's alive to night to pay off."

Glendon managed an hour's sleep toward suppertime, and woke to souse his face in the wash basin and find a smile for Swift.

"What will they do," she asked.

"Fight," he said. "Till somebody yawns."

"How long is that, Pat?"

"I think it will end tonight," Glendon said.

"An' who—?"

"Who wins?" he asked. "McMann has more men, but that other buck is here to stay. I'm inclined to bet on them."

"But McMann will get help," Swift said. "From the colony."

"No help there," Glendon said. "This is off limits for the army. McMann set up his town and made his own law. Now he's tasting the same medicine. He can't stay the army. The step in is on orders from your territorial governor and who will let him know in time? Nobody."

"It's a terrible thing," she said. "I can't believe it's happening."

"No one does," Glendon said. "But it happens. Now, when it gets dark, we want no lights. I'll be outside."

"Why?"

"Safest way," he said. "Anybody comes barging around, I can stop them before they get too close. I could do with some more of this." "I'm up to it," she said, "but don't ask me how I'll live in the morning."

McMann watched darkness cross the sky and smother the street below; the rifle spattered into silence as men waded in the kitchen. McMann paced the upper hall, gnawing his thumb, planning for the night. He had 21 able-bodied fighting men, while enemy casualties had cut their strength to a rough dozen. McMann planned a diversion for midnight, a direct fire fight across the street, during which time he would send two flanking parties out to move upon Leslie's store. Then a calculated period of silence—say two hours to lie in wait for all suspicions; and then an assault. That should come at approximately 3 a.m. when a man's spirit dipped to lowest ebb.

Those flanking parties would need coal oil, rags, and blasting powder bombs. They would carry shotguns and Colts for the finishing. It was now 9 o'clock, giving him three hours to issue orders, prepare special equipment, re-evaluate his plans for possible error. Well satisfied, McMann stepped away from the nearest door and lit a cigar. At that moment the entire set of buildings quivered as the smashing thud of a heavy object someone had rammed a wagon into the north saloon wall. Flame flicker danced ruddy in the hall window. Rifle fire boomed from across the street.

McMann heard the surprised shouts as he ran to the fairhead even as he rushed down the stairs. He rushed down the stairs into the saloon and took personal command of the situation. He organized a bucket brigade, sent the bartender with two men to hang water across the saloon from the rear door movements. Bailey led six men outside and around the corner; other men passed sloshing buckets from the water barrels in the back room. Within five minutes Bailey returned with his report. "Curt," Bailey said. "We put it out."

"Now we shall give them a taste of stronger medicine!" McMann shouted.

The bar seemed to swell suddenly and slap him in the chest. He was blown forward against the knurled edge, he staggered backward and reached out for support. He fell against a table as the concussion first deadened, then seeped from his swollen caridams; and he heard timbers crashing, floors grinding apart, smelled arid smoke on the blast wind. In that moment McMann relented to his mistake, recognizing that, as a military man, should have known the hay wagon was a feint, that in his own stubbornness he refused to credit ignorant fools with such wit. They had tricked him with the hay wagon; and now he faced a truth he could not believe, much less combat. His world was coming apart before his eyes; his mind clouded over and he walked unsteadily toward the hotel lobby, thinking only of escape.

Buck was sleeping in the last hotel room on the back hall when the fire started. He sat up, rubbed his face, and listened. A few minutes later the blast spun him off the bed against the bureau. He rose unharmed as the café and store collapsed, then burst into flame. Leaping to the south window, Buck saw men run from the livery barn and take up a firing line facing the back lot. Buck tossed his Winchester aside, kicked off his boots, and dug his soaked toes into the rag rug. A man had to travel light, the way they were headed. He stepped into the hall and waited beside the back door; and Bailey came running from the lobby with a dozen survivors. Fire crackled into the lobby, illuminating the hall, painting a greasy red patina on their faces. McMann shouted orders that made no sense; no one listened as they came around him. Bailey tapped his knuckles on the door and shook his head.

McMann shouldered between them and spoke gibberish that ended as Buck clouted him on the ear and spun him against the wall.

"But up," Buck said, "get up." "All right, boys. Run fast and head for the river."

Bailey broke from the doorway, the others close behind, and the rifles exploded from north and south. Bailey shot back and forth, then bent down, slowed, speeded up, twisted toward the ice-house and yawned away. The second man dropped but Bailey was still going, very near the outer darkness.

"Well," Buck said. "Are you going or staying, McMann?"

McMann clung to the door frame, heat from the hall blistering his shirt. He yelled something and burst outward on his heavy legs, head thrown back, running without sight or thought. Buck watched him pass the halfway mark; then three-quarters as he reached the ice-house. As he stretched desperately for darkness a dozen shots kicked dust around him, smashed him down, rolled him over dead. Buck stood alone in the hall, pursing his lips in disgust. There went a meat ticket; but the way things had gone, they might as well strike out on their own.

Buck closed the door and turned into the bedroom, dumped the water picher over a blanket and draped it on his raised forearms; it provided a shield as he ran up the hall into the lobby and fought his way through rising flames to the saloon. Buck ran to the back storeroom, picked his way between whiskey barrels and beer kegs, and found the small side window boarded up long ago to prevent the fire. He wrenched the boards away and boosted himself through the opening, left head first to the ground, and rolled to his knees. Colt ready, still in darkness here as he had expected. Buck began crawling north, away from the fire and the town, into the night.

CHAPTER IX

GLENDON lifted Swift and led the way to the house. She faltered and he held her firmly while she cried at last, a necessary relief she had bottled up too long. Manuel halted them a minute later from the front yard, asking for help to put out the fire at Leslie's store.

"Right with you," Glendon answered.

"Cubley," Swift said. "Is he all right?"

"Manuel!" Glendon called.

"Sir?"

"Leslie?"

"Unharmed, senor. Please come quickly and bring a bucket if you can. We will need much help."

Manuel charged off to the south, shouting into other houses as he ran, and Glendon found the water bucket in the darkness and made swift strides to the front door and step outside beside him.

"Now you go and see Mrs. McMan," Swift said.

"We'll need coffee before the night's over."

"Pat," she said. "How did it end. What will happen now?"

"Tomorrow," Glendon said. "Don't give it a thought tonight. We'll know tomorrow."

Glendon slouched exhausted on a nail keg outside the livery barn, thinking dully how all of life seemed to be a process of getting hurt, turning wounds, and getting hurt again. He saw the people of the town crowded into the street before Leslie's store, staring apathetically at the smoking ruins of McMann's tin empire. Only the half-melted ashed walls, jagged and black, smelted what had been the greatest influence in their restricted lives.

"Here comes Adams," Jones said. "If he ain't a sight!"

Glendon swung around on the nail keg and saw Adams limping up from the river, a ragged scarecrow resurrected from the dead. Adams joined the crowd and established his old authority with a few eloquent gestures; a few sad words, proving the shrewdness of those men who turned weakness into virtues. Adams was alive and returned to the town, therefore he was a better, more virtuous man than McMann who was dead. Now was the time to throw Adams out of town, give him half an hour, holding Buck's horse, before they started up the trail; in that minute Buck saw the steps into Leslie's store.

"They ought to cut him into tripses," He's laughing at me, you know," Jones said.

"I know it," Glendon said tonelessly. "I know it too well, Joe."

Adams spent 10 minutes in Leslie's store before he limped down the street toward Glendon. He then came to the saloon, and the crowd of men who turned sinner turned righteous; and no man became so righteous as a reformed sinner, and a false one at that.

Adams plumped down on the ground beside Glendon and rubbed his dirty hands across his eyes. "Pat, I want to see you later on today, I just sent a message to the fort, I begged the colonel to telegraph the governor. Last night was

murder. We must have law and order in this country."

"You've changed," Glendon said curtly.

"Wouldn't you?"

"So now you want a sheriff?"

"I do," Adams said.

"Appointed by the governor?" Glendon asked. "Taking orders from the governor. You want that?"

"I do," Adams repeated. "His orders would be identical with my own wishes."

"I don't blame you," Glendon said. He rose from the nail keg and moved off, then paused to voice Adams' unspoken fears. "You better find some law fast. Bailey and Buck won't be polite and wait on you."

"Pat—"

He walked away before his anger got out of hand. Adams had played both ends against the middle so long that, like McMann, he had become his position impregnable. Now Adams knew all too well that Buck and Ed Bailey would run wild, tired off all factions impatiently, laugh at all law. Adams was afraid for his life; and Adams wanted him to shoulder the burden.

Glendon entered his house, heated water, and scrubbed his filthy body until the skin was red. He dressed in clean clothing, buried the dirty outfit in the garden, and walked on to the river. He would not forget last night.

"I knew you were here," Swift said. "Come up and eat."

She had washed and changed into the well-worn clean trousers and blue shirt Glendon forever associated with the clean face and, most of all, the clean mind. She carried sandwiches, coffee, and two cups of coffee over one inner door. Glendon turned from the water and joined her on the flat rock and ate with sudden hunger. The coffee pot drained, he rolled a cigar.

"I saw Adams," Swift said. "He told me you had a talk."

"He talked," Glendon said. "I walked away."

"The news is already around town," Swift said. "Everybody hopes you'll take the job."

"Don't push it at me," he said roughly.

"I'm sorry, Pat."

"No," he said. "I'm sorry. Listen, there's not much left here. What will you do?"

"Adams wants me to stay," she said. "He's going to run the place."

"With what?"

"Money," she said simply. "A lot of money. I copied the joint will they drew up last year; each gave the other everything in case of death. Adams has it all."

"The meek shall inherit the earth," Glendon said swiftly. "In a—don't you want to get out of here, Swift?"

"I don't know," she said. "Every time I think so, I wonder where I'd go, what I'd do. Pat, will you take the job?"

"You mean, you want me to?"

"Yes," she said, and then. "No—I don't know what I mean."

"I know what you're going to do," Glendon said. "Go home and go to bed."

He watched her go away, tall and slim, and wondered how much he ought to read in her words, how far she would look behind the new-spun fabric of their friendship. She had sensed his outrage today, his compulsion to do something for these people. She was sickened by last night but he saw it with different eyes, with wiser eyes, as a repetition of similar nights in distant towns.

Only three men rode north from McMann's pens across the river. The others elected to cut and run for El Paso. Ed Bailey and Tom McMillan were half an hour behind the new-spun fabric of their friendship. They started up the trail; in that minute Buck saw the steps into Leslie's store.

Buck led them from the trees to the river, and did not bother looking back. They followed. Ed Bailey riding rear guard. All through that day no words were spoken but they understood: Buck was the leader. Ed Bailey was second-in-command. They could not shake the horse from the south camp, a line cabin and horse corral beside the windmill; and Tom McMillan's horse went lame.

Colter's camp man stood beside the tank and waved them water the horses. Buck shook out his rope and cut the fresh horse from the corral. He was protesting through the gate. The camp man was only a thin-faced, gangly boy but he ran out to grab Buck's rope and give it a hard yank. Tom McMillan

called, "Hey, boy. We're trading you my horse." But the boy started down the rope toward the Colter horse, and Buck said calmly, "We're wasting time. Buck shot once and the boy lifted his arms and fell away from the rope. Buck pulled the horse over beside the tank, tossed the rope to McMillan, and punched the spent cartridge from his Colt.

"Shift your gear," Buck said. "We've got cows to gather."

Buck had shot the kid in the back, and the kid wore no gun. Bailey had ridden through his own life and reached that moment when a man either turns back or crosses an invisible line and went on; and once he crossed the line he would not return. Then a man lived on until his string ended. He had watched Buck the past three weeks, wondered how near Buck was, when it might happen. The fight at McMillan's was enough to change any man; but even then Bailey was not sure. Now he looked at the body beside the corral gate and followed Buck eastward into the twilight. The moment had come and passed, so quickly Buck himself would be unable to name it later on, to say that was the time. But Ed Bailey knew, and rode on. There was no turning back for them now. They rode one road and it would squeeze narrower every passing day.

★ ★ ★

News gathered slowly in a country so vast. John Colter had his rifle to the state capitol, but it took a week to bring him information that spread a wintry grin on his round face. So John Colter was going back to business at the old stand, was he? So Adams had used his influence to request law and order in the county, and recommended that Glendon for the sheriff's job. So John Colter, when his man from the capitol reviewed Glendon's past; but he grinned at the latest news, something Adams had evidently not heard. A change of government was taking place, the new governor was arriving tomorrow from the east and it would take time before the new man—a general of the army—was ready to operate. Colter gave his man orders and sent him back to the capitol. Adams had influence, but John Colter was infinitely more powerful.

His man carried instructions to Colter's lawyers; that he, Colter, wanted law and more than any anybody else, that Glendon was a sound choice for the job—if the former Kansas marshal would accept. However, Glendon needed deputies and Colter recommended a man from Fort Ellis who also wanted peace and was said to be a good citizen, would accept a deputy's badge to the detriment of his own business. John Colter would be happy to meet the new governor and offer the benefits of his hard-earned knowledge if it would help, in any way, to mitigate the present situation.

Then John Colter gave succinct orders to Pasqual: ride to Fort Ellis and tell Charley Leslie to expect someone from the governor's office and answer yes to that man's question. There would be another deputy, of course, and that man should be of Spanish blood. Leslie was to recommend Manuel.

"At once," Pasqual said. "But what about Buck?"

The boy from the south camp had been found, the story read accurately in the tracks around the tank and corral; and 200 head of prime stock was missing from the south herd. The line cable and the crew were on the bitter edge these days. They had liked the boy who worked so hard, listened eagerly to their advice, a boy found shot in the back, a boy untried but for the rifle left in the line cable.

"Hold tight," Colter said. "Now I don't mean if you run into Buck. Just bring me his ears then. But we won't go lallygagging after him just yet."

"Yes, patron," Pasqual said grudgingly.

John Colter grinned. He would be sure to acquire law and order, Pasqual. Better to be on the side of the law, eh?

CHAPTER X

THEY sold the cattle in Texas and spent two days carousing in a dirt town. Buck and Leslie disappeared while the other two drank and played cards; but where the others were inclined to linger, Buck routed them out and led the way south. Hoping for Sherman, he took the south around Colter's range. Into the dry canyon a mile east of Fort Ellis. In early evening Buck went off toward town, returned an hour later, and led them down to the corral behind the store. Buck had spent a busy hour on the witness of the mattress and five-gallon cans of coal oil.

"Burn the store," Buck said. "I'll meet you at the pens."

The others hesitated and Bailey said, "Come on, then." He had spoken very lightly during the day, showing neither approval nor disregard for Buck's ideas. He knelt beside a mattress and slit one side with his knife; this was more to his liking, this made sense. They owed Charley Leslie a left-handed debt if nothing else. Bailey poured coal oil on the ripped mattress, hauled it aside, and began on the next.

"Yes," Buck said.

"No shootin' tonight."

Buck caught the nod of agreement and led his horse off south. He made a wide circle to the river and tied the black in the willows above the ford. Then he walked to Glendon's back door and cupped his hands to his soft whistle brought Glendon outside, lamp in hand.

"You make a fine target," Buck laughed softly.

Buck, it's good to see you," Glendon said.

"Surprised?"

"Yes," he said. "I figured you'd be south."

"How far, Pat?"

"With the river between us," Glendon said.

"Things are rough around here, Buck."

"It wasn't our fault," Buck said. "You know Colter, that that burn in."

"I didn't mean that," Glendon said.

"What else is there, Pat?"

"That boy," Glendon said. "At Colter's south camp."

He waited for a denial, knowing it would be the truth, but Buck only reached for the bubbling pot and poured his coffee and grinned.

"Oh, him?" Buck said. "I plumb forgot that, Pat. I had no choice, he gave me trouble."

Glendon wanted to ask what trouble an unarmed boy of 16 could offer five men; and the words were useless. But simply would not understand. Buck was gone, gone forever over that line Glendon knew so well.

"A new governor was sworn in," Glendon said. "I hear he's going to take off the roof on the territory."

"Don't you worry about me," Buck said. "If that governor don't bother me, I'll leave him alone."

Buck, Glendon said patiently. "That's the point. He can't leave you alone. He's got to do something."

"An' where do you stand, Pat?"

"When I always told you," Glendon said. "I want to see things settled down."

"With old John snoring?" Buck laughed. "And Adams sticking around here? Between them, Pat, they won't let things settle down. That Pasqual is goin' to trail me."

"Maybe the governor can handle Colter," Glendon said.

"Can't be done," Buck said. "But what I should like to say is, you want to take a little ride? We're heading for Sherman."

"No, Buck," he said steadily. "It wouldn't do any good now."

"Are you figuring on staying here?" Buck asked.

"A while longer," he said. "I—"

He heard the wild yell up front, "FIRE!" and ran to the front door and saw the first flames rising from Colter's store. He wanted to grab his bucket. Buck put a hand on his arm and grinned.

"If you stay," Buck said, "you'll sure have plenty of burning fuel."

"Buck," he said.

"Pat, I just got to go."

"Buck," he said sharply. "What for?"

"Oh, you mean that?" Buck said. "Calling card for Leslie. Teach him to stay out of other folks' business. Adios, Pat."

★ ★ ★

In the two weeks following the burning of Leslie's store, business ground almost to a standstill in Fort Ellis. Leslie refused to rebuild, so he was done with business, yet made no move to leave town. Leslie had received his orders from John Colter and was biding his time, waiting for Adams' next move; and Adams, hauling in supplies and opening a makeshift store in the ivory barn, made no move.

After a few days passed news trickled in from the territory. Buck and his crew were stealing cattle from Colter, taking horses from everybody, slipping into Sherman for supplies and fandangos, carrying Colter's men back and forth against Colter. Buck killed four men during that period, Ed Bailey shot another, and rumor numbered Buck's crew at 10, then 15,

then 20. On Monday of the third week Joe Jones came to Glendon's house with a message: the governor's personal representative would like to speak with him. Adams said, "He'll be here."

"In a few minutes," Glendon said.

He finished shaving and slipped on his last outfit of worn, patched clothes and crossed the back lot, knowing what to expect. If two men would wait to answer. He met the governor's man, a gentleman of 50-odd with sharp blue eyes and tiny white teeth gleaming behind a brown beard. His name was Avery and he wasted no time talking business.

"The governor is ready to act," Avery said. "He is mailing letters to various men throughout the territory. He has proposed an amnesty to all men who have broken the law. If two men will wait to the capitol, put off your guns, and sign the amnesty, they will not be held liable for any crimes or killings previous to that date. The governor feels it the only way we can wipe the slate clean."

What do you think of the idea, Glendon?"

"The governor means well," Glendon said.

"You don't think it will work?"

"It hinges on one thing," Glendon said. "Will every man concerned take off his guns?"

"That's the real test," Avery said. "We've got our doubts, too, but we have to try it. If it won't work, the governor will take immediate steps. If the amnesty fails, will you accept appointment as sheriff of this county?"

"Try your amnesty," Glendon said. "I promise you an answer if it fails."

★ ★ ★

Avery returned on the fifth day, crossed the river, and drove directly to Glendon's house. Avery got down, much the worse for wear, and shook hands gravenly.

"Take it up to the barn," Avery said his driver.

"I'll walk over."

The driver turned and walked inside without invitation, seated himself at the kitchen table, and shook his head.

"You see Buck?" Glendon asked.

"Could you make some coffee?"

"Yes," he said. "Basin's over there if you want to wash."

He made coffee while Avery washed face and hands; before the pot boiled Avery lit a cigar and began to read the chronicle of his trip.

"I can speak frankly with you," Avery said. "I have been around a bit, as you have guessed by now, and seen my share of tough customers. This one has me stumped. Yes, I saw Buck. He got into Sherman. He asked me to come with him. I went into Smith's saloon and inquired for Buck, and Smith pointed to the back table. I introduced myself, he shook hands with a big grin, and invited me to sit down. One minute we were alone, next a man named Bailey was sitting with us and three more were out front watching my driver. I gave Buck the governor's letter. He read it twice and told me it wouldn't work. He said he and Adams wanted to get rid of them because they had worked for McMillan. Buck refused to sign. Nor would he promise to leave the territory when I suggested it might be time for him to consider. He offered him a week's grace to reconsider, to wire the governor if he changed his mind. I don't expect that, Glendon."

"Was he staying in Sherman?" Glendon asked.

"Even before he was shot."

"If you think it'll help," Glendon said, "I'll ride up and talk with him."

"That's a generous offer," Avery said. "I know how you happened to meet Buck. He told me all about it. I'd say he likes you better than any man he has ever known. Strange, on such short acquaintance, but it happens. You could talk yourself blue in the face and he wouldn't care. He's past redemption, Glendon, and we both know it."

"You know what I ought to do," Glendon said.

"Of course," Avery said quickly. "Get on your horse and head for the capitol. But you won't. You're as incorrigible as I am. Look at me, Glendon! More years than I care to remember in the agency, retired last year. Along comes an old friend, and he asks me to serve him. He is taking a new post and he needs help. And you can't dodge it, Glendon. Either you'll pack up and ride away in an hour, or you'll stay on. And if you stay, you've got to help me. I mean, I don't only a few tens, some of us are limited to one. What do we do well, we have got to do. Glendon, I'm asking a great deal—perhaps your life—and I'm just selfish enough to demand it. Will you?"

Glendon unfolded the paper and read the official wordage and noted the salary—an unreasonable—

ably high state of pay—and felt the pencil pushed into his right hand.

"We don't need ink," Avery said.

He signed and watched Avery replace the paper in his coat and lay the star on the table; it glittered in the dull light, shone into his eyes.

"That's," Avery said. "You need two deputies. Any preferences?"

"None," he said.

"I have two recommendations," Avery said. "Charley Leslie who has good reason to volunteer. He recommended another man, Jones at the livery barn. Jones has other reasons. He wants a better job with higher pay, but I think he can handle it. Will you go along with them at the start?"

"They'll do," he said.

"I'll appoint them immediately," Avery said. "Now what do you need?"

"A shotgun," he said flatly. "Ten gauge double barrel, sawed off two inch port, forearm. I use a double ought buckshot. Colt and Winchester ammunition. Same order for both deputies."

Buck's gang had come down from the northeast at dawn, eaten breakfast, and slept through the heat of the day. The town was quiet and no one disturbed them, not even the handsome young man with the game leg who drove his wagon toward the river and the hills beyond. But during the day a posse came into town and talked with Coyote Smith, and rode on his way. Coyote Smith polished glasses and waited expectantly for supper. When Buck and Ed Bailey came up the buck hall and lifted their pre-supper drinks, Smith said idly, "Heard some news today."

"What?" Ed Bailey said. "The governor dropped dead?"

"Not exactly," Smith said. "He appointed a new sheriff in this country. A man from Fort Ellis named Glendon."

Buck tossed off his drink and rolled a cigar, his face roiled and pleasantly blank. Finally he said, "Pat Glendon?"

"That's the man," Smith said. "They're building a new courthouse in Ellis, complete with jail and handcuffs. An' he's got two deputies, man named Leslie and another one named Jones."

"If he comes through," said Buck, "tell him to stay out of my way. Leslie and Jones! That Leslie and his store, now he's after trouble, too. Tell them I start shooting on sight. You hear me, Coyote? Tell him to stay clear."

"Just sort of liked him, did you?" Smith said. "Just pour the whiskey," Buck said tonelessly. "I've got no friends. I don't need any!"

CHAPTER XI

GLENDON established a temporary office in the harness shop across the street from the livery barn. That same day workmen poured into town, pegged down a tent camp, and began the courthouse in the vacant lot just above Leslie's burned-out store. Later in the morning the roundhouse stage brought Glendon a sealed pouch from the governor's office; and minutes later a fast freight wagon deposited a packing case outside the livery barn. Jones went over, read the shipping tag, and signalled.

"Open you, Pat."

"Cart the ammunition over," Glendon said. "Clean the guns. Break out a box of shells each. Target practice in 10 minutes." It was then he saw Swift approaching. He had warned her about his job, but the shock was plain.

He wanted until they carried the packing case across the street; he took Swift's arm and led her away from the crowd. She smiled and she smiled and she failed. She humped the sawed-off barrels and flinched, and Glendon said, "It won't bite, Swift."

He laid the shotgun in her hands and felt her arms give beneath the weight.

"Se heavy," she said.

"Has to be heavy," Glendon said. "To carry these loads. Swift, I wanted you to see it. I took the job, now I'm tied to it. From now on you'll be doing the fishing for both of us."

"I know," she said, "but we can have coffee at night."

"With luck," he said. "Now get out of this sun."

She smiled and walked away, leaving him alone in the barn wall shade, the smell of grease and oil rising thick in his nostrils. He thought of bygone days when he patrolled his street—and it was

always his street—with the shotgun under his arm; it had become a symbol in those towns, a mark of rough justice.

July wore on and August came with unabated heat. Black clouds rolled lazily above the peaks, lightning flashed in the night sky, rain was only a mirage. Glendon trained his deputies and crept on the lonely trails and drew into his mind a picture of his county. He sat in the stuffy office and waited through the long, hot days for the first break, the word from Avery, the time to start. He watched the building race between Adams' local crew and the capitol work-gang. The new hotel took on shape, the courthouse rose from foundations of timbers and finally reached a crest, crept with adobe and vigas and rough-cut lumber; the work-gang built the courthouse from timbers and boards, every silver hauled down from the railroad tracks. The courthouse was no Grecian urn, no thing of beauty forever; it was a stopgap built for one purpose—to place a mantle of authority over the county.

Glendon moved into the office an hour after the last nail was hammered home, and across the street Adams' crew finished the hotel roof and put the big windows into the bar front. The same hantender tapped his first keg of beer and broached his whiskey; that night was Adams' grand opening with everything the house of Adams had no heads in his hotel, no counter in his cafe, no desk in his new upstairs office; but he played the host that night; he rushed the growler with a smile and the town whooped it up; men had laughed and sung and drunk in McManis's time. That same night a special messenger brought the latest news on Buck, a stack of eastern papers with a letter from Avery.

Buck's gang had grown to eight members, all men who ignored the governor's amnesty and wanted only to live their own lives at the expense of others; work not, yet reap all the harvests. The eastern papers filled with overblown accounts of Buck's adventures. It was time for action now.

John Colter rode into Fort Ellis with 30 men behind him. They spread along the street while Colter, with his gun slung under his arm, stepped into the saloon and ambled down the centre aisle toward the sheriff's office. Pasqual followed him closely, and two men took stations outside the double doors. Just as Colter entered the office, grinned at Charley Leslie and Glendon, and dropped into the nearest chair.

"Pat," John Colter said. "Here you got a new courthouse and deputies, an' you ain't done nothing for a month. When are you taking Buck off my track?"

"Waiting on you," Glendon said.

"On me?"

"Swear out your complaints," Glendon said. "Name your witnesses."

"Complaints?" Colter said. "You know what's going on. Buck killed my foreman, that hoy at the south camp. Go out and get him. Bring him home in a box."

Glendon inked a pen in the bottle and looked up calmly. "Get it down, Colter. Are your witnesses ready to testify in court?"

John Colter held his angry words. He had made no mistake at the capitol. He dared not sign that complaint, name his witnesses. If Glendon brought Buck alive to trial, a real honest trial with judge, jury, and honest lawyers, Buck might talk loud and long; but these few days he worked for Cross Creek.

He stomped out of the courthouse and cooled his heels on the steps. He waited patiently until Charley Leslie stood beside him, and then he said, "What's going on?"

"Jonesty at the capitol," Charley Leslie said softly. "We were just making plans when you came in. I'm going up there tonight."

"That don't tell me nothing!"

"I know all I know," Leslie said. "Don't be so impatient."

"So?" John Colter said shrilly. "Feeling your oats?"

"Doing my job," Leslie said meaningly. "And getting paid in cash."

"You'll be paid," Colter said. "Just keep your eyes open. Watch Adams, get word to me through Manue."

"Paid?" Leslie said pointedly. "Just when, Mr. Colter?"

"That was my store burned," Colter growled. "I lost the money. Keep your shirt on. You'll get it?"

"Five hundred," Leslie said. "From now on." "FIVE."

"I'm risking my life," Leslie said. "Ante up or the deal is off."

"You tin-horn," John Colter said. "Let me say it for you. An' deal it is. An' don't go peddling certain information or you'll leave this town in a box." He turned and touched Pasqual on the arm. "Take a good look at him, Pasqual."

"I see him, patron," Pasqual said.

"Save it for the poems," Charley Leslie said coldly. "You promise a lot, Colter, and you pay off in pennies. Now stop trying to bribe an officer of the law or I'll step inside and report to Glendon."

John Colter had his temper under control once more, he grinned, hitched up his overalls, and went down the street to the new hotel. C. B. Adams, superintending the placement of the cafe counter, greeted him pleasantly, glanced toward the courthouse, and offered a deliberate wink.

"Seeing our new sheriff, Mr. Colter?"

John Colter stepped through the empty door casing and motioned Adams into a corner. "You figure on doing business the same way, Adams?"

"I had no fire sale," Adams said, "hut I'm back at the old stand."

"You'd get burned out again," Colter said bluntly.

"Oh, come now," Adams said. "Those days are finished. Our new sheriff is unbreakable, Mr. Colter. You should know, eh? You just saw him."

"You going to keep those heef contracts?" Colter said.

"I have certain leads," Adams said primly. "And a bit of influence."

"Penny ante," Colter said scornfully. "And you'll buy no more of my cattle, Adams. I've got my crew full and I'm all done fiddling around. I'm going to Washington next week and take a closer look at your influence."

"Do that," Adams said. "Although I doubt your reason for the trip. I think perhaps you want to have a healthy distance from Fort Ellis if Glendon brings Buck in."

"If I go to Washington because of Buck," John Colter said shrilly, "you ought to head for South America."

"Why are we at odds?" Adams said softly.

"We want the same thing, Mr. Colter. I am thinking of the future when this country opens up. If I were a palm-reader, a fortune teller, I might say, 'I see selling cattle to me, I see money selling these herds to the government. I see all concerned making more money and staying within the law.' Well?"

John Colter said swiftly, "Can you take care of Buck?"

"I can," Adams said. "Given time."

"Then take care of him," Colter said bluntly, "and we'll talk business."

"In my own way, no questions asked?"

"No questions asked."

Charley Leslie did not ride alone that night. A messenger came roaring down from the railroad, bringing word that Avery had sent him word the same time, and sent for Leslie and all posse members. They were mounted and riding within 30 minutes, Manuel leading them north in a steady driving pace. They rode toward the north, and at the next morning, five miles south of Sherman, the next morning, at ten time, breakfast hastily cooked and eaten, Glendon sent Manuel forward to scout the town and locate Jones.

Manue took the open road and came holdly into Sherman, dismounted outside the saloon, and limped inside. He saw Jones at a table, playing cards with a harmless looking old man, and decided to bluff. He straightened up, and stepped in. He questioned Coyote Smith about work, and took his leave. He trotted south over the first ridge, waited patiently, and was rewarded a few minutes later when Jones came in on trot. Manuel said, "Follow me," and led Jones back to the river camp. Jones went straight to the breakfast fire and squatted beside Glendon.

"Here's the names," Jones said, opening his notebook. "That one scratched out—he's dead up at Vegas."

"Did they come in sight before last?" Glendon asked.

"Seven of 'em," Jones said. "Stayed all night and hung around till last night when a Mex came down from the north and passed them some news. They headed west right after dark."

"You know why they left?"

"Oh, sure," Jones said. "The news was all over this morning."

"How do these people take it?"

"Listen," Jones said, "they're scared to death of him."

"Think they'd help him?"

"No," Jones said thoughtfully. "They're just standing by."

"Lay out your map."

Jones spread his rough pencil sketch on the ground. The others gathered around and Jones pointed out roads, plaza, old army buildings, and the Lopez house. He described all roads, each one as far as he had been able to ride out. His work was good and he accepted Glendon's thanks with a self-conscious grunt.

"Now what?" he said.

"We start the merry-go-round," Glendon said. "We get them quick or we keep trying. We'd try that west road first. Leslie, you take everybody a mile out that west road from the river. Find the best place for shooting and square off. Manuel, you keep covering the other roads."

"S."

"Jones," Glendon said. "You come with us. We're going into town."

"Town?" Jones said.

"I want to get acquainted," Glendon said. "Hang around all day and leave tonight for home."

"But we don't go home, eh?"

"It's an old dodge," Glendon said. "Worth trying once. Leslie, look for us at dark."

CHAPTER XII

GLENDON rose from the saloon table at dusk and paid the bill. Coyote Smith followed him to the hitch rail where Jones stood beside the horses. "Glad to have you, sheriff," Smith said. "Come back any time."

"We'll be back," Glendon said.

"Heading for Fort Ellis?"

"Possibly," Glendon said. "You might do two favors for me, Smith."

"Name them."

"Tell Buck I was here," Glendon said. "Tell him we'll save time and bother if he turns himself in."

"I'll tell him," Coyote Smith said.

Glendon led Jones south across the plaza on to the fourth road, followed it two miles, stopped and listened, and made the western circle across the river back to the west road. They came up slowly and saw the thin line of trees along the road. Glendon walked twice and saw the flankman's spot on the east. "Come on in, Pat," and loomed out of the darkness to lead the way to the pickets. Horses staked, Glendon walked the tree line with Jones, checked every man, placed Leslie at the west end with Jones and went down to take up the flankman's spot on the east. He found a spot 10 steps from the road and settled himself against a tree with the shotgun across his knees.

Glendon cupped his hands and called to the next man.

"Pass the word," he said. "If one or two come riding, let them go. Understand?"

"Got it," Billy said.

The order was relayed up the line to Jones and Leslie. Glendon knew he should have given that order 10 minutes ago. Was he getting careless, forgetting that little things meant so much? He shivered in the cooling night and slipped the shotgun higher on his knees; and heard the horses coming from the west.

He went flat and brought the shotgun to bear on the fourth road. He listened for two, three or four horses, no, just two—and lay unmoving as they passed by and disappeared in the moonless night. He counted off the minutes, five, eight, 10, and heard the faint, growing sound of more horses coming leisurely from the west. When the lead rider loomed up in the darkness, 10 yards up the road, Glendon cocked his triggers and lifted his voice in a shout.

"Buck, put up your hands!"

He saw the shadowy bulk of horsemen pull close together, then spring apart as spurs drove home. He fired one barrel high against that dissolving mass, showed his eyes as the others began showing and muzzle blast came red. He looked once more and saw two riders veering off to the north; and far down the road toward town he heard more shots. Then he ran for the road, shouting to Leslie and Jones, "Close in!" and

stumbled over a horse. He fell full length, scrambled to his feet, and almost immediately saw a fallen man. He bent down, touched that body, and went on. Ten steps away someone grabbed a bridle rein and tried to soothe a wounded, struggling horse.

"How many?" he said.

"One here," Jones said. "Hold on, here's another one—Pat, this one's alive."

"Watch him," Glendon said.

That made three down, he thought, and two away clear. Two had ridden past. Seven in all; it tallied out. He winced at the horse's high, almost human cry of pain and called, "Shoot it," and stood up on the road until he found Jones and Leslie beside the wounded man. He said, "Look at the others, Jones," and cupped a match above the face bulb. Strange eyes looked up at him, glared, shock, seeing nothing, or looking far beyond their own vision. Jones came on the run to say, "Both dead. Don't know either."

"Get the horses," Glendon said. "Send a man back for Manuel."

"What about this one?" Leslie asked.

"Forget him," Glendon said harshly. "He's gone now."

He cursed savagely, the first time Charley Leslie had felt the axe edge of his temper. "Die on me," Glendon said to the dead man. "When I needed you!" He swung around, bumping Leslie roughly. "Come on, there's no time."

Manuel took the lead and Glendon followed, at a walk, until Manuel's voice drifted back: "Senior, they came this way."

"You're sure?" he called.

"Very sure! We are lucky, senior."

"Hit 'em hard," Glendon said. "Take us up there, Manuel."

They rode behind the slender man, riding fast through the night, and Glendon knew that Buck's stubbornness was betraying him. Avery's letter had said, "Do your best, senior. The governor wants to make an example of him. If you cannot, shoot to kill." Well, four men were dead and one captured, and it meant nothing. Only Buck would feel, for as long as Buck rode free he would find more men of the same breed; and it would be to do all over again. Glendon rode in the night and smelled pines as the trail lifted and began a twisting assault on the slopes; and Manuel was already beside him, halting them all, saying, "Behind the big hill, senior. In the hollow."

"How far?"

"Half a mile maybe."

"Hold down," he said. "Tie the horses here. Form a line, Manuel, take us over."

They moved up the hill, off the trail, then on the sloping level of the side hill, then downward as the earth receded. Glendon smelled old fire smoke as they came to the edge of timber and felt grass under their boots. Manuel whispered, "Senior, they are in the cabin. Their horses are behind. Wait here."

They spread out in the trees facing the bottom of the hollow. Minutes later a man groaned and Buck's voice came clear and angry. "Get up, Ed. Get up in the tree!" Then came the sound of horses moving in the trees behind him. The cabin buck shouted and Glendon fired one barrel, then the other, shooting blind into the darkness below. He heard the cabin door slam shut, heard the cross-bar drop in place, and only then did Glendon smile. Moments later he saw the tiny flame flicker, saw Manuel throwing wood on the cookfire, saw the cabin take shape in that light.

"Settle down," he said. "Watch that door. We'll hit it out for Colter."

He hitched himself around on the stony ground and raised the shotgun on the door and wished, as usual, for a cigar. Charley Leslie came crawling along the lay beside him, puffing from exertion.

"That man of yours is good," Glendon said.

"Plenty good," Leslie said. "Pat—"

"Yes?"

"You'd better understand something," Leslie said. "He works for Colter."

Glendon rolled on his side and wiped sweat from his eyes. A good deal that had puzzled him came clear: If Manuel was in Colter's pay and knew it, then that drew out the mystery. Understand why Leslie had finally told him tonight. Colter wanted Buck dead, not on trial, and Manuel would be looking for the chance. But Leslie, in warning him, gave himself away. He would be watching two of them from now on.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll watch Manuel. I expect you to do the same. I want Buck alive."

"So do I," Charley Leslie said wickedly. "I want to see him hang."

* * *

Gray dawn came like a crippling running, lifting darkness on the floor, showing the ceiling, beside the tank. They had waited out the night, Manuel had fed both fires, and no one had escaped the cabin. Glendon cleared his throat and called, "Buck?"

"That you, Pat?" Buck answered cheerfully.

"Give it up," Glendon said. "We know Bailey's hurt."

"We'll stick it a while, Pat. If you get nervous, come on down and get us."

"Buck," Glendon said coldly. "You're going to get hungry and thirsty. Bailey's hurt but for all I know, I'm not waiting around all day. Take five minutes to make up your mind. Come out my way or we'll burn you out!"

* * *

Buck lay in the hole he had dug in the dirt floor. Ed Bailey was against the back wall with a dirty shirt sleeve tied around his shoulder. Ed grunted with pain and Buck said, "Shut up, you're not dead yet."

"You heard him," Ed Bailey said. "He'll burn us out. We've got no chance. Let's give up!"

"Sure," Buck said softly. "No jail holds me!"

"Then tell him," Ed Bailey said. "Buck, tell him!"

* * *

"Pat?"

"Yes," Glendon answered. "Five minutes are up."

"I'm hungry," Buck said. "Ed thinks he's dying. So I guess we'll give you this round. We're coming out."

Glendon called, "Watch the door," and trained his shotgun to the right where Manuel and Leslie were already standing in the tree shadows. Manuel glanced toward him, saw the shotgun, and lowered his rifle. Charley Leslie saw those twin muzzles, stepped back behind Manuel, and lifted one hand in agreement. Then the door was open, rifles and Colts flashed in the sunlight, arcing through the doorway to the ground. Then Buck stepped outside, supported by Ed Bailey, and walked toward the trees. Charley Leslie holstered his Colt, walked forward, and jerked Buck away from Ed Bailey.

"Burn my store," Leslie said. "I'll watch you dance for that, Buck."

"Let go," Glendon said curtly. "Manuel, take care of Bailey."

He took the handcuffs from his pocket, pinned Buck's hands behind his back, and snapped them on. He said quietly, "You all right, Buck?"

Buck was watching Manuel work over Ed Bailey. Buck looked around and smiled, and Glendon knew that Buck was grinning at the way Manuel lost his chance.

"Surrender," he said. "Thanks, Pat."

"Don't thank me," Glendon said. "No prisoner of mine is manhandled. Jones, get the horses!"

CHAPTER XIII

"I've been sitting here like a little girl in the dark," Swift said. "How did it really happen, Pat?"

They sat on the bench facing her garden in the cool August night that foretold fall weather, their first time together in three weeks. Glendon had spent those days at the capital where the law's slow-grinding machinery moved toward the politically expedient conclusion. Wanted in five counties, the governor finally arranged to hold his prisoners' trial in the new Ellis County courthouse. Glendon had brought them home for tomorrow's trial, and now he sat relaxed for the first time in weeks.

"How?" he said. "Luck, the kind that kisses you once in a lifetime. That night we jumped them, Buck said, 'Listen to me, I'll tell you how he tried to warn Buck but they swung back on the cabin trail. Manuel smelled their dust and we followed them to the cabin. I used that trick once last in the middle of summer in Western Nebraska, so dry the dust was powder, hung in the air for hours. I trailed a man 50 miles, never saw him, caught him when his horse gave out. Dust and luck.'"

"What will happen to them?"

"Bailey and Buck will hang," Glendon said.

Buck's talking with his lawyer tonight, Swift. Did you know that?"

"No."

"The smartest man in the territory," Glendon said. "Adams hired him, brought him down to defend Buck and Ed Bailey."

"Adams?"

"Don't ask me why," Glendon said wearily. "I could name a dozen reasons and each contradicts the other. Buck and Adams put up the money and I'll be a fight . . . he thinks!"

"But won't it, Pat?"

"No," he said bluntly. "Not with Tom McMillan giving evidence. Nobody knows that but the governor, Avery, and me. I am telling you in confidence. Are you coming tomorrow?"

"I can't watch it," she said.

"Nobody wants to judge another," Glendon said. "It will always be that way. It should."

He stretched his arms stiffly against the darkness. He had lived on five hours sleep a night for three weeks, and tomorrow would be a brutally long day. Swift rose beside him and looked toward the river; the stars twinkled night and the town behind them murmured with the expectant sound of people talking late. The hotel was jam-packed with newspaper men come hundreds of miles to watch the trial and report the results. A Roman carnival, in truth, for Buck no longer a plain man. He was a legend one step from history, no matter that his last steps would take the gallows route.

"Late," he said. "Let's hope it begins and ends tomorrow."

"It's been thinking about us," she said timidly. "You," he said.

"If it ends tomorrow," she said, "what will you do?"

"Swift, I wish I knew," Glendon said. "Let's wait and see. Maybe we'll stay and maybe we won't, you and I. Let's hope for a vision."

"I need one," she said. "Stay or go, that's the question, eh?"

"Sleep on it," Glendon said gently. "Good-night, Swift."

When he entered the office next morning Leslie was back in the cell block, pursuing his favorite pastime of the last three weeks: giving Buck an unmerciful riding. Leslie spent a good share of his waking hours telling Buck exactly how much he'd enjoy watching Buck's heels dance in the air. Now, sitting at his desk, checking over the day's tight schedule, Glendon heard that cold, cruel voice telling Buck to shave, shine, and shampoo himself for the judge.

"Leslie!" he called.

Charley Leslie came from the cell block and offered Glendon a smile and mock salute. He had waited weeks for today, and the triumph lay over his face in the smile and the curl of his lips.

"Charley," Glendon said. "Stop riding him. He'll be tried, convicted, and hung in a little while. What more do you want?"

"Anything I can get," Leslie said bitterly. "I'd like to spring the trap!"

"Because he won't whine?" Glendon said.

"Because you can't break him, make him crawl, beg for mercy? Charley, you could ride him a year and he'd be tougher at the finish. Just don't give him a chance to do anything. Not one chance."

"I'd love that," Leslie said. "But he'll get no chance. As for the other, is that an order?"

"Yes, order," he said. "I won't tell you how to talk and walk and live, Charley. Where's Jones?"

"Breakfast," Leslie said.

"I'm going out for a minute," Glendon said. "Remember, when we bring them in, they come one at a time, 10 feet apart, three of you on each man. During the trial you watch your own man every second."

"Don't worry," Leslie smiled. "They won't get foxed."

"Charley," he said. "You never know."

He left the office and went through the courtroom to the front steps. He entered the cell block and stopped facing the first cell where McMillan sat in the red-faced silence.

"Enough to eat?" he asked.

"Plenty," McMillan said tonelessly. "When do we start?"

"Few minutes," he said.

Toward the end, heat and pressure were nearly unbearable. The lawyer for the defence was a clever fellow who had no way to show his metal. Glendon never forgot the look on Buck's face when McMillan

was called as a witness for the territory. McMillan took the stand and the prosecutor led him through a detailed description of the night Buck's gang rode down on the railroad telegraph stop, how Buck had shot the operator in cold blood; how Ed Bailey had bucked Buck to the limit in that particular case and, in another, had fired the shot that killed a man on Cross's southern range. Ed Bailey looked up in mild surprise at mention of that almost forgotten shooting; it was too late to do anything and the clever lawyer said truth. He did his best, but his best was useless. The evidence was presented to the jury, they withdrew for eight minutes by the clock, and returned with their verdict: "Guilty".

Buck never opened his mouth, just sat smiling faintly at the jury, then at McMillan, as the next words came.

"The prisoners will rise and face the bench!"

Buck and Ed Bailey rose together; and now time was running out on the last day of its kind in this land.

"Edwin Bailey, I sentence you to be incarcerated in the Ellis jail until September 1, and on that date between sunrise and sunset you will be hanged by the neck on a gallows until you are dead!"

Ed Bailey met the judge's eyes squarely; and it was true, Glendon knew, that no one really cared what happened to Ed Bailey. He was the frosting on the cake; he was the forgotten man. They watched Buck and they waited for the words that came now in measured tones:

Aderton, I sentence you to be incarcerated in the Ellis jail until September 1, and on that date between sunrise and sunset you will be hanged by the neck on a gallows until you are dead!"

"One week from today," Charley Leslie said. "Just seven days, Buck, I hope you try something before then. I'm disappointed."

Leslie stood facing the cell where lamplight shone weakly on Buck's face. Leslie had eaten an hour ago, relieved Jones, and waited now for Manuel Martinez to take over the night guard. He had thrown bitter words at Buck for an hour, and received nothing in return. When Manuel arrived Charley Leslie said sourly, "So you've given up, eh?" and crossed from the courthouse to the cafe, drank a cup of coffee, and found his man waiting on the dark veranda.

"What a day," Adams said. "I'll never forget it, Charley."

Charley Leslie had gained little satisfaction from Buck; now he had crossed the street to claim a promise made long weeks ago.

"I am resigning shortly," he said. "Eight days from now, to be exact."

"That is a shame," Adams said. "You've done a fine job, Charley."

"I am not a deputy sheriff," Leslie said curly. "I've developed richer tastes, C. B. and I'm too old to change. When do we start?"

"Start what, Charley?"

"You and I talked," Leslie said. "Some time ago. You dangled a proposition before my eyes, you suggested we discuss it at our leisure. I'll be at leisure in eight days and I expect a deal that fits my needs."

"Of course," Adams said. "And I haven't forgotten. Will you take over the hotel?"

Charley Leslie threw his half-smoked cigar into the street. He began cursing softly and he continued to curse until his anger ran itself around on his dry lips. He said then, "Don't joke with me. I want no hotel clerk job, no saloon job, no cafe job, none of your penny ante junk, Adams. You're in business again, and I want out!"

"I'm not a money business," Adams said calmly. "Honest business. I'll do anything within reason."

"How true," Leslie said. "Anything within reason. I can't name the page and verse but it'll be coming. Now for the last time—do you want it?"

"I'm sorry," Adams said. "I cannot offer you anything of that sort, Charley."

"You can't?"

"Nothing, Charley." "I'm sorry too," Leslie said. "I just had a long talk with Buck. He still feels badly about the major's untimely death. He feels the major cheated him by dying and cutting off all that easy money. So he's got me and he might hope to get me out of a statement for the attorney-general, or managed a meeting with that gentleman, and told him about you and the major, how he helped sell you so many hundred head of cattle. He remembers several things, and he's got the gold to you, and he's got to speak, and rebranded with the major's brand

which, if I remember correctly, was not only registered in the major's name but in yours as well. Buck told me he can put his finger on 50 or 60 of those old hides. I told him to think it over three or four days and let me know."

Charley Leslie lit a cigar and smiled about the match flare. He saw the round, red face white in sudden fear. "Well," Leslie said. "What should I do, C. B.?"

"All right," Adams said. "You've coppered my bet. What do you want?"

"I don't leave here," Leslie said, "with full pockets. What is it worth to make certain Buck never sees the attorney-general, never writes a statement?"

"One thousand," Adams said without hesitation. "I'll deal, C. B."

"Five thousand," Leslie said. "Cash in advance."

"Half now," Adams said. "Half when the job's done."

"Stop it," Leslie said. "I'll take a turn up the street, the upstairs when I come back, have the \$5,000 on my desk when I open the door. You've got 10 minutes."

He stroled along the veranda, stepped down to the street, and walked past the courthouse. He smoked his cigar and laughed happily, thinking how the best of the finally came around. When you touched the proper nerve. He had no intention of attempting anything as stupid as shooting Buck in a cell and making it resemble a jail break. He returned to the hotel, went upstairs to the office that smelled of varnish and fresh paint, took the package of bills from the desk, and tipped his hat to the red-faced man in the swivel chair.

"When?" Adams said.

"Fifth or sixth day," Leslie said.

"No," Adams said. "No later than the fifth day."

"Agreed," Leslie said.

Adams felt the doubt growing in him through the passing days, the feeling that at last he'd been taken lightly and politely. When nothing happened on the fifth day he knew he had to act. He did not doubt that Leslie had bailed him, he had doubted less that Buck might give a long talk to the attorney-general. Adams slept not at all that night, and reached his decision at breakfast.

He went upstairs, locked his door, and opened the safe. He took out a couple of cigars, lit one in two fresh cartridges, and went over the tiny gun with an oiled rag. He slipped into his wide-sleeved black coat and attached the spring holder to his right forearm, just above the wrist. The derringer clamped in neatly, the shirt and coat sleeve hid the slight bulge. C. B. Adams took a fortifying drink from his private stock and walked steadily across the street to the courthouse. He asked to speak to Buck and went down the aisle to the end cell. He winked twice and saw Buck's eyes narrow, and then he spoke on as only a lawyer could, until sufficient time had passed. Luck smiled just before he made his move.

Adams felt, rather than saw, the turning of Jones' head toward the office. C. B. Adams had the derringer in his hand by then. He wheeled, his right side to the cell, his body blocking a segment of bars and cell door. From the door view for the moment, it took to start his turn. He tossed the derringer between the bars from that shortened distance of six inches, saw Buck's big hand engulf the gun; and then he saw the end of the cell block, turned toward the courthouse, into the street, and smudged when he reached the hotel lobby, and he mastered fear with great effort. He saw Charley Leslie at the cafe counter, drinking coffee, and that was more than he could stand. He moved toward his face. C. B. Adams went upstairs and locked himself in his office. He placed the spring holder in the safe, removed his black coat, and rolled up his sleeves. He spread an inch-thick stack of legal papers on the desk, dipped his pen, and smudged his fingers with ink. Then he moved the big chair close to the windows, seated himself, and looked down upon the street. He could see the courthouse and most of the city. He tried to light a cigar but his fingers trembled at the match's smoky blackness. He took another drink, corked the bottle, and settled back to wait. On the second try he lit the cigar and puffed in triumph.

"Now, Charley," he said aloud. "Get ready for the last act!"

CHAPTER XIV

Buck pained the derringer and stood motionless behind his cell door. McMillan was asleep but Ed Bailey was already up and waiting, watching him in eager silence. Buck wasted no time pondering C. B. Adams' reason or motive; all he could see was freedom in the near distance. . . and squaring his debts before he left this place. Buck pawed at his shirt pocket for tobacco and papers, pocketed the derringer, rolled a cigarette, slipped the derringer out and into his right hand, and held the cigaret ready in his left.

"Joe," he called.

"Now what?" Jones asked.

"Need a light," Buck said.

Jones said, "You must eat them matches," and came down the floor, scratched a match on his pant seat, and extended it toward the bars. Waiting for the cigaret tip, Jones started into the twin derringer muzzles leveled on his belt buckle.

"You got the keys?" Buck said.

Jones hesitated a split-second too long before he answered, "No!"

"I've got no time to fool," Buck said. "Lift that right arm above your head and yank those keys with your left."

Jones took the key ring from his left hip pocket and inserted the proper key in Buck's cell lock. Then Buck was outside, spinning Jones around, jerking the Colt from his holster, tossing the derringer between the bars to Ed Bailey, following that with the key ring. Buck was five steps up the aisle when McMillan sat up and said, "What?"—and screamed, the thin, throat-choked agony of a dying man.

"Shut up," Buck said genially. "Ed, you out?"

"Coming," Ed Bailey said.

"Come on, Joe," Buck said. "Let's go make ourselves at home."

Ed Bailey prodded Jones toward the office; and McMillan leaped on his back, grasped his window bars, and began shouting. McMillan had nothing to lose and he knew it too well. Back to his cell door face pushed against his window bars, McMillan cried for help and waited for the shot. The county clerk came rushing from the courtroom, ran squarely into Buck's Colt, and fainted dead away on the floor. Ed Bailey and Ed Bailey Jones, into the corner and backed off toward the gun rack, fumbled through the keys until his left hand, working blind, turned the padlock.

"Watch him," Ed Bailey said.

Buck sat on one corner of the desk and grinned at Jones while Ed Bailey rummaged through the stack found his own Colt and holster, found Buck's and tossed it on the desk, then took two Winchester and ammunition, closed the rack, snapped the lock, and pocketed the keys. McMillan was screaming now, a keening sound that carried down the street. Buck walked over to the inner door and smiled at McMillan.

"Turn around, Mac," Buck said.

McMillan wheeled from the window and took the shot in the chest.

"Watch Joe for me," Buck said happily.

Buck, Ed Bailey said. "Let's move."

I'm expecting a visitor," Buck smiled. "You just watch him."

Buck stood in the doorway, shotgun balanced against his hip, looking across the empty bench rows toward the hall doors. He heard boots thud up the steps, through the hall, and the door slammed back as Charley Leslie came charging down the centre aisle. Buck let him come half a dozen steps, time enough to see the double barrel lift, to see Buck grinning at him along the rib. Buck had not been happy for weeks but this moment before Leslie had nearer real joy than any he had ever felt; happy, smiling, he pulled trigger and watched the heavy buckshot load slam Charley Leslie against the benches. But not too soon; not before Leslie had seen him and had time—that second called eternity—to remember. Buck shuffled around the ball's table before the judge's bench and fired the first round into the body, raising dust puffs, bouncing the body on the floor.

"Buck!" Ed Bailey called. "Come on!"

Buck shuffled back into the office and grinned at Jones. "You stay where you are," he said. "Maybe you'll live longer. Ed unlock those irons."

Ed Bailey-knelt down and unlocked Buck's leg irons, dropped the key ring, snatched it up, and wedged with front teeth on the door handle. Buck drew his Colt and tossed the shotgun into a corner. Watching Jones, he took the Winchester and turned

out of the office without a word, moving up the centre aisle, over Leslie's body, through the hall into the bright sunlight on the courthouse steps. Behind him, Ed Bailey unlocked himself, scooped up the other Winchester, and prodded Jones into the cell block. He locked Jones in the first cell and ran stiff-legged to Buck on the court steps.

"Upstairs windows," Ed Bailey said. "Don't stand here."

Buck laughed. "We'll ride out. Nobody'll lift a finger."

Ed Bailey had no choice. He followed Buck down the street, jumped the first horse at the hotel hitch rail, knelt sideways, tried to cover a dozen windows and doors. He cursed softly as Buck deliberately picked a good horse, and more deliberately as he rode in a circle before the hotel. Ed Bailey would not understand the meaning or growth of a legend if someone painted such a picture under his eyes; but truth came to him then, as they touched spurs and the length of the street away from the river, that no one in town dared aim a gun at Buck.

They crossed the river and passed the major's empty pines and raced for the hills; an hour later, pulling in for a blow, Ed Bailey wiped his sweat-soaked face and studied the back trail.

"Adams," he said hoarsely. "We owe him something, Buck."

"We owe him nothin'," Buck laughed. "Wanted us out of the country."

"And let's go," Ed Bailey said. "Let's get over the line and stay there!"

"Compadre," Buck said. "You forgettin' we've rode together?"

"No," Ed Bailey said. "I won't forget. You know that. But we're finished, Buck, an' I'm riding south."

"You go on," Buck said. "I'll hang around a while."

"Buck," Ed Bailey said. "That's the way Glendon'll figure you. Don't give him no advantage."

"Nobody pushes me," Buck said softly.

Ed Bailey swung his horse to the south and looked at Buck one last time—for there would be no future time.

* * *

All Glendon could do when he returned was sit in the office with Avery and Jones. Buck and Ed Bailey had a nine-hour start, and riding off half-cocked was simply a waste of time.

"They crossed the river," Glendon said. "Rode west. That's all we know." He held the derringer in his right hand, angled it twice, and dropped it into a drawer. "We can cross Ed Bailey off. He won't stop until he's over the border. And he won't come back."

"But you think Buck will stay?" Avery asked.

"He'll stay."

"Which makes him a fool," Avery said.

"I'll tell you," Glendon agreed, "and he can't tell you why himself. Call it pride, call it anything. Maybe it has no name. But he'll stay! Avery, how many men can you get in 24 hours?"

"Two hundred," Avery said. "Possibly more."

"Will you try my way?" Glendon said. "Push him hard and hope for a break?"

"I'm with you," Avery said. "You name it, Pat."

"Wire the governor," Glendon said. "Have every town watched. Start men pushing in toward Sherman from over in the Bravo valley, down from the railroad. Root into every sheep camp, cabin, ranch. Stop at the Cross C and Colter where his crew north and south along the Texas line and work this way. Can you get the governor to put up a reward for Buck? As big as he can make it."

"Five thousand?"

"Dead or alive," Glendon said. "But pass the word to shoot on sight. No use talking with him. He'll never come in alive."

"Where will you be?" Avery asked.

"Sherman," Glendon said. "I'll wait for him there."

"Pat," Jones said. "You got to take me with you. I can't stay in this country after today."

"I'll blame you," Glendon said.

"Can I go?" Jones said thickly.

"Why, man," Glendon said. "You're the next sheriff of this county. I want you and Manuel. Go to it."

He knew how Jones felt. To be on guard and allow Buck freedom was the worst possible punishment a good deputy could suffer; and Jones was honest about that—a good man, a good man, Jones run from the office, and heard Avery say, "You have a good effect on deputies, Pat."

"He came slow," Glendon said. "Just finding himself. He'll do."

"Now," Avery said briskly. "I'll be at the railroad in six hours. Give me until tomorrow night to put my men in motion. Do you want me to come down on Sherman?"

"Yes," he said, "but after dark. Then lay out to the north, west, and south, and don't cross the river to the west. I want Buck to come in that way without trouble, without suspicion. Jones and Manuel will be in the saloon. I'll be in that woman's house."

"I'll see you at Sherman," Avery said. "Good luck."

* * *

Leaving the courthouse, Glendon met Jones and Manuel. Mariner court stood up the front steps. Manuel had taken charge of the bodies, made a list of effects, and now placed a grimy finger on one specific item: \$3,000 safe-pinned inside Charley Leslie's shirt pocket.

"Where is it?" Glendon asked.

"Clerk's office," Manuel said. "In the safe."

"All right," he said. "Meet me at the barn in 10 minutes."

He walked down to the hotel and saw Adams behind the door. Good! He had time to get ready. He crossed the lobby and stood silently against the desk until Adams looked up, smiled, and shook his head.

"A terrible business," Adams said. "I see you are out of town. Good! Charley got hold of \$3,000."

"I'll try to get to the bottom of it," Glendon said. "If I have time."

"Charley, you mean?"

"No," he said bluntly. "How Buck got that derringer."

"Derringer?" Adams said blankly. "Oh, was that the gun?"

"Buck left it on my desk," Glendon said. "And you were the last man to visit him."

"You don't believe —?"

"Charley had \$5,000 in cash on him," Glendon said. "He didn't own \$500 last week. He hadn't been out of town. Nobody here has that much money. . . nobody but one Charley."

Buck got hold of a derringer, but Charley didn't give it to him. I'll be doing some guessing while I figure it out. Maybe Buck'll have time to tell me. "You are accusing me," Glendon said. "Accusing me of giving Buck that gun?"

"Not officially," Glendon said. "Just guessing."

Glendon went away from the hotel and through the sunny day to his home. He saddled the big horse, strapped on his blanket roll, and headed for the gate; and Swift came running to catch his hand, then she was in his arms, head buried in his shoulder. He said awkwardly, "I'm sorry about Charley, Swift."

"You're going now?" she said.

"Got to," Glendon said. "Buck's way ahead."

"How long will you be?"

"I can't tell you now," he said. "Until it's over."

"Pat," she said. "I've got to ask you something."

"Yes?" he said, impatient now.

"I'm asking you, Pat. I don't care what you do, where you go. Will you be with me?"

He swung the shotgun barrels away from her arm and touched her cheek with his rein hand. He said wonderingly "You sure jerked up in the summertime, and then he pulled her close and they stood silently until the big horse cracked at the reins. Glendon said, "You wait right here, Swift. I'll do the asking."

CHAPTER XV

Buck rode alone in a land he had ruled with the gun. Times without number he had ridden from night into the lonely sheep camps, off the timbered slopes into cabin yards, across flats to the aspen pole corrals where two-by-two ranchers were waiting for him, and dropped another steak in the pan. But now, one day and one night free, he sensed the change and felt the cold wind warning of Ed Bailey's good-by. Now.

That night he slept in the timber and woke in early dawn hungry. He watered the horse and drank deeply, and sat beneath an old bull pine, staring eastward at the sky—a good man, a good man, Jones run from the office, and heard Avery say, "You have a good effect on deputies, Pat."

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